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# Perceptions of Air Force Civilians Regarding Participation in Nonresident Professional Military Education

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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2016

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MDiv, Luther Rice Seminary, 2009

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## Abstract

In spite of a 2009 memorandum from senior Air Force leaders calling for civilian employees to participate in nonresident Professional Military Education (PME) courses, employees' PME completion rates have remained low. This qualitative study investigated the perceptions of nonresident PME held by 12 employees at an installation with a nonresident PME completion rate of less than 3% in 2013. The theories of reasoned action and planned behavior guided the 5 main questions that asked participants to describe their familiarity with nonresident PME course content, availability, and structure; as well as their perceptions of organizational support for PME course participation, their capacity to complete PME courses, the role of nonresident PME in their leadership development, and the importance of PME completion for attaining their career goals. The data were manually coded and organized according to the emergent themes and subthemes. None of the participants identified any external barriers to nonresident PME completion, but factors such as supervisor support, prior participation in enlisted PME, personal interest in PME course content, and inconsistent hiring practices influenced participants' perceptions of nonresident PME for their professional development and career progression. The findings and prior research suggest the Air Force should educate PME eligible civilians regarding the benefits of nonresident PME, conduct focus groups to discover employees' specific learning needs, and assist supervisors in establishing effective mentoring relationships. These actions have the potential to enhance employee motivation, to align employee development with organizational goals and objectives, and to increase supervisor–subordinate collaboration.

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# Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my wife, Rosalyn, and daughter, Faith. Even though completion of this project took much longer that any of us anticipated, both of you supported and encouraged me every single step of the way. I love you both very much!

## Acknowledgments

I am convinced that because of God's overflowing grace and the immeasurable patience and indispensable guidance of my committee members—Dr. Michael Butcher, Dr. Clifton Addison, and Dr. Nicolae Nistor—I was able to complete this doctoral study. Thank you, Lord, and thank you, doctoral study committee!

Table of Contents

Section 1: The Problem

## Introduction

Leadership development for civilian employees has been an important aspect of professional development programs within U.S. military organizations for many years. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has developed innovative programs and initiatives to ensure that DoD civilians have the occupational and leadership skills needed to meet mission goals and objectives (Rude, 2012). For example, the DoD Civilian Leader Development Framework, accompanied by the Civilian Leader Development Continuum, focuses on 31 competencies associated with competent leadership, such as strategic thinking, entrepreneurship, conflict management, accountability, continual learning, and technical credibility (Rude, 2012). Leadership programs such as the Defense Civilian Emerging Leader Program, the Executive Leadership Development Program, and the Defense Senior Leader Development Program, were designed to recruit and develop the next generation of entry-, mid-, and senior-level civilians who possess technical and leadership competence across the military service branches (Rude, 2012).

Within the DoD, the United States Air Force faces ever-evolving challenges related to readiness and training. Some of these challenges include the implementation of national and international policy objectives, the replacement of aging weapons systems, budget cuts, and global terrorism (Garamone, 2012). Also, General Mark Welsh III, Air Force Chief of Staff, acknowledged the difficulty in stopping sexual assault as the courts-martial for military training instructors accused of various sex offenses proceeded in San Antonio, TX (Garamone, 2012).

To meet these challenges successfully, former Secretary of the Air Force, Michael Donley, and former Air Force Chief of Staff, General Norton Schwartz, recognized the increasing reliance on Air Force civilians and that the approximately 143,000 civilians are vital to the Air Force's mission of *fly*, *fight*, *and win* in air, space, and cyberspace (Hughes, 2009). General Schwartz underscored this in remarks regarding the fiscal challenges that will lead to a smaller Air Force, stating, "It is obvious that everybody in the Air Force is needed…not only pilots, but also all members of the service" (Garamone, 2012, para. 6). In addition to being an essential part of the Air Force's ability to meet National Security and military objectives, Air Force civilians play key roles across the DoD and in the U.S. government.

To properly organize, train, and equip civilian employees, Air Force professional development programs and activities must be structured in a way that supports civilians at all stages of education, training, and experience. This customizable approach to Air Force civilian development focuses on producing civilians who perform well at their jobs and who exhibit high levels of leadership skills critical for supporting the Air Force's warfighting mission (United States Air Force, 2003). These guiding principles form a framework built around two required competencies: occupational and institutional. Occupational competencies describe the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform in a particular occupation or function, whereas institutional competencies span functional communities and include the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to lead and manage the institution (United States Air Force, 2003).

The Air Force Management and Development Council devised a civilian institutional leadership development continuum that establishes the minimum expected level of professional development for all Air Force civilians ("Civilian Continuum of Learning," n.d.). This roadmap addresses three levels of employee development:

- tactical
- operational
- strategic (Hughes, 2009).

Each of the three professional development levels featured a recommended combination of education, experience, and Professional Military Education (PME) to help Air Force civilians master their primary duties and to develop their leadership skills. For example, the tactical level of development includes education opportunities, such as vocational schools, certification programs, and academic degree programs along with Squadron Officer School (SOS) as the proper PME component. At the operational level, the same kinds of education opportunities are included along with the appropriate PME such as Air Command and Staff College (ACSC). The strategic level would include continuing education courses combined with Air War College (AWC) or its equivalent ("Continuum of Learning," n.d.).

The Air Force Continuum of Learning (n.d.) also spells out the foundational and targeted institutional development programs available throughout the careers of civilian employees. Civilians in pay grades GS 1-8 or equivalent pursue education, training, and experience to develop their tactical expertise. Operational competence is the development focus for GS 9-13 or equivalent civilians. Moreover, civilians in grades GS

14-15 or equivalent hone their institutional competencies for performance at the Strategic Level.

Depending on their desire for increased leadership responsibilities, civilians can choose the education, training, experience, and PME opportunities appropriate for their grade levels and career goals. To maximize participation in development opportunities, the Air Force provides civilians with access to a number of programs and resources to help them identify and acquire the appropriate institutional competencies (Lilly, 2012; Shabazz, 2014). For example, Career Field Functional Managers advise civilians on the recommended experiences, education, and training needed to enhance their occupational qualifications and leadership skills. Reimbursement for expenses incurred when obtaining licenses and certifications required by state and federal authorities, as well as tuition assistance for continuing education and self-development courses are available. High performing civilians can apply for selective in-residence PME opportunities, which they attend alongside their military counterparts at Air University, Maxwell AFB, Alabama. Nonresident PME programs are completed through distance learning and are available on a nonselective basis to civilians possessing a bachelor's degree and the required pay grade. In addition, Civilian Acculturation and Leadership Training supplies select civilians with leadership, communication, and warfighting skills (United States Air Force, 2003)

## Definition of the Problem

In their June 2009 letter regarding the Civilian Force Development Continuum, Secretary Donley and General Schwartz put forward the expectation for AF civilians to

complete nonresident Professional Military Education (PME) as part of an employee's foundational development (Donley & Schwartz, 2009). According to Air Force senior leaders, nonresident PME completion is an essential ingredient for closing the gaps in civilian development along with New Employee Orientation Training, self-initiated personal and professional development, and Civilian Acculturation and Leadership Training to develop leadership, communication, and warfighting skills (Donley & Schwartz, 2009). Moreover, Air Force leaders understand that nonresident PME is crucial for building occupational and institutional competencies at the Tactical, Operational, and Strategic development levels (Hughes, 2009). When put together, these professional development venues establish a foundational baseline that all civilian employees are expected to meet during their Air Force careers.

Appropriated fund federal civilians (i.e., civilians working in agencies funded by congressional appropriations) in grades GS-9 and above who possess regionally accredited baccalaureate degrees and who have completed at least one year as a federal employee may enroll in nonresident SOS. Civilian employees in the grade of GS-12 or GS-13 with a bachelor's degree are eligible to enroll in nonresident ACSC. Furthermore, civilians in grades GS-14 and GS-15 with a bachelor's degree may enroll in nonresident AWC. Civilians can enroll at no cost in nonresident PME throughout the year by submitting a request to Air University (The Air University, n.d.).

Air Force personnel demographics for 2013 show that approximately 9.2% of 143,242 permanent, full-time civilians have completed at least one PME course –

Squadron Officer School (SOS): 3.6%, Air Command and Staff College (ACSC): 3.5%, and Air War College (AWC): 2% (Air Force Personnel Center, 2013). It is important to note that 29% of Air Force white-collar civilians had at least a bachelor's degree, which is required to enroll in nonresident PME. However, the demographics do not indicate the number of white-collar employees by pay grade that possessed at least a bachelor's degree (Air Force Personnel Center, 2013). These statistics reflected modest PME completion rates for civilians across the Air Force.

Also, PME completion rates for civilians at individual installations were sometimes substantially lower than the Air Force-wide completion rates. At the time of this study, I examined the Air University enrollment database for the large Air Force installation to which I am assigned and discovered a nonresident PME completion rate of approximately 2.6%. This statistic was roughly 71% below the overall Air Force completion rate of 9.2%, which suggested a significant misalignment with the Air Force's stated emphasis on nonresident PME as a key component of civilian foundational leadership development. The scale of this misalignment indicated a strong efficacy for investigating this low completion rate.

## Rationale

### Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

PME completion rates for civilians at two Air Force installations to which I have been assigned were significantly lower than the Air Force-wide completion rates. At a small pilot training installation in the southern United States where I was assigned from 2006-2012, 1.2% of 516 civilians assigned enrolled in nonresident developmental

education. Of the 258 employees on the installation in grades GS-9 and above, six were actively enrolled in nonresident SOS and two civilians had completed nonresident SOS from 2006 to the onset of this study in 2012.

Civilians in grades GS-12 and GS-13 with bachelor's degrees can enroll in nonresident ACSC. A search of the Air University PME enrollment database indicated that out of the 190 eligible employees, no civilian at this installation was actively enrolled in ACSC at the time of this study. Since 1995, 14 employees have enrolled in nonresident ACSC, but only three of these employees had completed the course at the time of this study. Regarding nonresident AWC enrollment (GS-14/15), the installation had one eligible employee who had not completed AWC and was not enrolled at the time of this study. Furthermore, the database showed that since 1995, no civilian assigned to the installation had completed nonresident AWC. These data indicated that low nonresident completion rates were occurring for as many as 20 years prior to the onset of this study.

As of December 2012, there were no active civilian enrollments for ACSC and AWC at this installation. According to the Air University database since March of 2006, two of the installation's civilians have completed nonresident SOS and one civilian has completed nonresident ACSC. Put another way, less than 1% of civilians assigned to the installation have completed at least one nonresident PME since senior Air Force leaders published their 2009 letter stating their expectation for civilians to complete nonresident PME as part of their foundational leadership development. The rate at which civilians on

this installation completed at least one nonresident PME course was 88.9% lower than the overall Air Force completion nonresident PME completion rate.

According to the Air University database, of the 4,844 civilians assigned to a large Air Force base in the southwestern United States, 1,623 employees are in grades GS-09 to GS-15 (also included in the total numbers were 21 appropriated fund employees in GG series and three employees in the GP series). For the years 2010 to 2012, eight civilians completed SOS, 26 civilians completed ACSC, and eight civilians completed AWC for an overall nonresident PME completion rate of 2.6% in the years subsequent to the 2009 letter encouraging civilian participation in nonresident PME. The completion rate for civilians at this installation was 71.4% lower than the overall civilian nonresident PME completion rate.

**Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature**

The U.S. Air Force fosters a learning environment that is committed to lifelong learning through education, training, and experience (Smith & Murray, 2002). For civilian employees, lifelong professional learning includes participation in nonresident PME. However, as described earlier, civilian nonresident PME participation rates at a small Air Force installation and a large installation were 1.2% and 2.6% respectively. These low participation rates may indicate that AF civilians face challenges accessing nonresident PME professional development activities.

Several research studies revealed that workers in a variety of occupations experienced barriers to participation in continuing professional development programs. For example, Lind (2007), a music education professor, examined barriers to professional

development by interviewing 57 arts educators at a California design institute. Respondents often cited a lack of time as a barrier to participation in development opportunities. Likewise, a group of 21 military hospital registered nurses stated that work schedules impeded their participation in professional development activities (Bibb, Crowell, Lyon, Miller, & Rybarczyk, 2003).

In another study, 90% of 1,131 Malaysian pharmacists agreed that continuing professional development is valuable for improving their professional knowledge; however, 80% of respondents indicated that job constraints, cost, and travel requirements were barriers to participation (Aziz, Jet, & Rahman, 2013). Moreover, 71% of the pharmacists said that a lack of time made accessing professional development activities difficult. On the other hand, 80% of the respondents were likely to participate in residence-based development activities, such as workshops and in-house training (Aziz, Jet, & Rahman, 2013).

In addition to time constraints, cost, distance, and the lack of organizational support were often cited as barriers to professional development. For instance, researchers investigated the motivating factors and perceived obstacles to participation in professional development activities by veterinary surgeons. Moore et al., (2000, as cited in Dale, Pierce, & May, 2013) found that veterinarians in California had difficulty accessing professional development programs due to distance, cost, solo practice, and family demands. A group of Canadian veterinarians also indicated that work obligations and distance were barriers to participating in professional development activities (Delver 2008, as cited in Dale, Pierce, & May, 2013). Dale, Pierce, and May (2013) surveyed

2000 UK veterinary surgeons and found that approximately 25% of respondents were not participating in development activities due to cost and lack of financial support from their employers.

In addition to the impediments of distance and cost, Cullinane, Pye, and Morgan (2013) revealed that inadequate organizational support had an adverse effect on continuous professional development participation among health professionals in Wales despite their acknowledgment that participation in development activities was an important personal responsibility. Human resources managers in these health organizations admitted that employee recruitment held a higher priority than professional development and training. In fact, managers said that funding all of their employees' professional development needs would quickly bankrupt their organizations (Cullinane, Pye, & Morgan, 2013).

Other factors reported as restricting participation in professional development activities were limited choice, availability, and applicability of development programs. In one study, 12 public school health teachers and administrators in northern Illinois stated they had no professional development program choices at their schools, which was inconsistent with state and national organization standards (LaCursia, 2011). The researcher postulated that a lack of teacher involvement in professional development decisions contributed to the absence of in-school opportunities. Furthermore, teachers who did access in-house development opportunities often found those programs not to apply to health education classrooms (LaCursia, 2011).

In the same way, a body of 497 coordinators of clinical education at sites in New York and New Jersey indicated they were not adequately supported by the prevailing professional development activities (Recker-Hughes, Brooks, Mowder-Tinney, & Pivko, 2010). Over 90% of participants indicated that on-site, in-service programs by academic faculty, as well as offsite workshops needed to be improved. The researchers uncovered a significant gap between the current availability of development programs and the types of programs desired by the clinical educators (Recker-Hughes, Brooks, Mowder-Tinney, & Pivko, 2010). In addition, as described in earlier studies, the clinical educators perceived that time and cost were barriers to involvement in professional development programs.

## Definitions

*Electronic Staff Summary Sheet (eSSS):* An electronic document that is used to transmit official information up and down the chain of command within or across Air Force organizations (Air Force Handbook 33-337, 2004).

*Nonresident Officer Professional Military Education:* A continuum of Professional Military Education (PME) courses designed to educate officers and civilians who must meet ever-evolving geopolitical challenges faced by the United States and its international partners. PME is offered in in-residence and distance learning formats at the basic, primary, intermediate, and senior developmental levels. For purposes of this study, civilian employee perceptions of nonresident PME are the focus (Carl A. Spaatz Center for Officer Education, n.d.)

*Professional Development:* Voluntary or mandatory involvement in programs and processes that improve employees' job-related skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Hughes, Brooks, Tinney, & Pivko, 2010; Shumack & Forde, 2011).

*Squadron Officer School Distance Learning Course (SOS DL):* An asynchronous online course that fulfills the Professional Military Education (PME) requirement for Air Force captains. Enrollment is open to all U.S. armed forces officers selected for the rank of Captain (O-3) and above and to civilian employees in the permanent grades of GS-9, possessing regionally accredited baccalaureate degrees and have completed at least one year of federal service. Enrollees have 12 months to complete the course (Carl A. Spaatz Center for Officer Education, n.d.).

*Air Command and Staff College Distance Learning Program (ACSC DL):* An asynchronous online course that provides intermediate-level PME to officers selected for the rank of Major (O-4). Federal civilians in the grade of GS-12 or GS-13 and have a bachelor's degree can enroll. ACSC DL must be completed within a 5-year period (Carl A. Spaatz Center for Officer Education, n.d.).

*Air University (AU):* An accredited military education system, serving as the intellectual and leadership center of the U.S. Air Force. Located at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, AL, AU is responsible for developing and administering SOS, ACSC, and AWC, as well as a variety of other professional development programs for enlisted, officer, and civilian personnel (Fadok, 2014).

*Air War College Distance Learning Course (AWC DL):* A senior developmental program for Air Force officers selected for the rank of Lieutenant Colonel (O-5) and

above. Federal civil service employees in the grades of GS-14 and GS-15 are eligible to enroll. AWC DL is offered online in an asynchronous format. Enrollees must complete the course within 36 months (Carl A. Spaatz Center for Officer Education, n.d.).

## Significance

Professional development of the civilian workforce is a vital component of the Air Force's capacity to support national security and national defense objectives. To that end, the Air Force's Force Development (FD) framework fosters a mix of education, training, and experiences to ensure that civilian employees are developed with the appropriate skills and competencies to meet mission requirements. The FD model emphasizes the acquisition of foundational skills and knowledge at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Air Force senior leaders expect civilians to participate in development programs and activities to build both their occupational and institutional competencies across these three levels ("Continuum of Learning," 2012).

Throughout their careers, Air Force civilians hone their occupational skills to meet evolving mission requirements. More importantly, civilians must develop institutional competencies that form them into effective leaders. The Air Force Civilian Leadership Development Continuum (CLDC) provides civilians a roadmap for building institutional competencies linked to the tactical, operational, and strategic development levels. The CLDC communicates the requirements, expectations, and resources for Air Force leadership development, as well as harmonizes the various leadership development programs ("Continuum of Learning," 2012).

Civilian employees are free to determine their personal goals for increased leadership opportunities and to choose appropriate development programs based on their grade, occupational series, and work experience. However, the Air Force expects all civilian leaders to complete foundational leadership development commensurate with their grade and years of experience. A key element of this foundational development is the completion of nonresident (PME): SOS, ACSC, and AWC. Nonresident PME is vital for building institutional competencies and skills at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels ("Continuum of Learning," 2012).

Therefore, because Air Force senior leaders have confirmed the criticality of participation in nonresident PME for the foundational leadership development of the civilian workforce, the rates of civilian PME completion are significant for the Air Force's ability to meet national security objectives. The overall Air Force civilian nonresident PME completion rate of 9.2% and the even lower local completion rate of 2.6% were significant in that they fell well short of the expectation for all eligible civilians to complete nonresident PME.

Statistics from Air University indicated that at these two installations the rates of civilian nonresident PME completion for the years 2010-2012 were 1.2% (small base) and 2.6% (large base). These civilian completion rates were 88.9% and 71.4%, respectively, below the Air Force's overall completion rate of 9.1%. Low levels of nonresident PME completion by civilians run counter to the expectation of senior Air Force leaders for civilians to complete nonresident PME, and, therefore, should be investigated.

## Guiding/Research Question

The intent of this study is to examine the attitudes and opinions of Air Force civilians regarding participation in nonresident Professional Military Education (PME) courses. Discovering civilian employees' confidence in their ability to complete nonresident PME courses, as well as their views of the organization's support for nonresident PME participation, the availability and content of these courses, and the importance of these courses for career progression is the principal focus of this study. Therefore, the central question and subquestions for this research are as follows:

*Central Question:*

What are AF civilian employees' perceptions of nonresident Professional Military Education (PME) courses?

*Subquestions:*

1. How do civilian employees perceive their capacity to complete nonresident PME?
2. How do civilian employees perceive organizational support for participation in nonresident PME?
3. What do civilians know about the structure, content, and availability of nonresident PME courses?
4. How do civilians perceive the inclusion of nonresident PME as a foundational part of civilian leadership development?
5. How do civilian employees perceive the importance of nonresident PME completion for the attainment of their professional and career goals?

In keeping with the theoretical frameworks of reasoned action and planned behavior discussed in the review of relevant literature, the answers to these research questions will reveal the factors that shape the intent of Air Force civilians to participate in nonresident PME.

## Review of the Literature

The purpose of this literature review was twofold:

1. to present the theory of reasoned action (TRA) and the theory of planned behavior (TBA) as the theoretical frameworks undergirding the investigation into Air Force civilians' attitudes toward participation in Professional Military Education (PME); and
2. to survey national and international research studies related to employee perceptions of professional development.

While the examined studies did not specifically address Air Force civilians' perceptions of participation in PME, they provided valuable insight into the attitudes toward development activities held by employees across an assortment of occupations, cultures, and organizations in the United States and abroad.

In keeping with this two-fold purpose, the literature reviews first focused on primary and secondary sources that explained TRA and TPB. I used the search keywords *reasoned action*, *planned behavior*, and *human behavior* to identify primary sources dating back to the 1970s, as well as more recent secondary sources in peer-reviewed journals. The second phase of the literature review accessed peer-reviewed journals, dissertations, conference papers, and so forth, that were five years old or less to the

greatest extent possible. These articles described research into factors that influenced employee participation in professional development activities. Keywords used were *continuing professional development*, *personal and professional development*, *perceptions*, *barriers*, *lifelong learning*, *employee education and training*, and *participation.* All literature reviewed was accessed through EBSCOhost and ProQuest online research databases in the Walden Library.

As previously stated, this research study is shaped by two theories that explain human behavior: the theory of reasoned action (TRA) and the theory of planned behavior (TPB; Langdridge, Sheeran, & Connolly, 2007). Behavioral scientists Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen first developed TRA in the late 1970s; Ajzen expanded TRA into TPB several years later (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, as cited in Ajzen, 1991). TRA and TPB have been used widely by researchers to explain a range of behaviors, including career planning, consumer buying habits, managerial strategic planning, recreational reading activities, and even condom use (Burak, 2004; Joshi & Kuhn, 2011; Manstead, 2011; Southey, 2011).

According to Hurtz and Williams (2009), TRA set forth that a person's opinion regarding the advantages or disadvantages of engaging in an activity coupled with the views of other people shapes behavioral intent. Fishbein (2000, as cited in Hennessy et al., 2009) further theorized that a person's beliefs and the opinions of others are affected by external factors such as past behavior, demographics and culture, stereotypes, moods, emotions, and personality; however, according to Fishbein, these external variables are not immediate determinants of behavior.

TPB, similarly to TRA, posits that a person's attitude toward the behavior and subjective norms influence behavioral intentions and actual behaviors. However, TPB extends TRA by setting forth the necessity of volitional control in the expression of behavioral intention (Ajzen, 1991; Chennamaneni, 2006). Stated another way, behavioral action requires the ability to perform the action (i.e., volitional control). This volitional control may be actual or perceived. According to Ajzen (1991), "Perceived behavioral control refers to people's perception of the ease or difficulty of performing the behavior of interest" (p. 183).

It is important to note that perceived behavioral control is a significant predictor of behavior because people are unlikely to plan to do that which is impossible but will intend to do something in accordance with their actual control over the behavior (Abraham & Sheeran, 2003). As it relates to this study, perceived lack of behavioral control may suppress an employee's participation in certain professional development activities, even when the employee highly values those activities. For example, an employee may intend to participate in a nonresident PME course, but fail to translate that intention into action when unforeseen health issues emerge, changing the employee's attitude toward participation in the course. In this case, the employee's response to the health crisis was an important predictor of behavior.

TPB has been the conceptual framework for a number of studies related to employee participation in professional development activities. For example, Chang (2006) examined factors that influenced workplace politics among MIS professionals involved in information systems development (ISD). In keeping with the tenets of TPB

(Ajzen, 1991; Chennamaneni, 2006), Chang (2006) investigated the extent to which MIS professionals' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived volitional control influenced the professionals self-interested behavior while engaged in ISD. Likewise, this doctoral study used will use TPB to explain the behavioral intentions of Air Force civilians concerning participation in nonresident PME.

When used to gain insight into employees' decisions to participate in voluntary development programs, TRA focuses on an employee's intention to participate as a precursor to their engagement in the development activity (Hurtz & Williams, 2009). According to TRA, the primary determinants of a person's intention to participate in an event include their willingness to conform to social pressures as well as their positive or negative emotions about the activity when there is a high degree of control over the decision to participate. In regards to participation in professional development activities, employees' fundamental perceptions of their vocation and workplace hold sway over decisions to engage in development activities (Hurtz and Williams (2009).

Utilizing the TRA and TPB theoretical frameworks, Hurtz and Williams (2009) studied factors influencing employees' participation in ongoing development activities within two state government agencies, a midsized Northeastern college, and a large engineering and technology firm located in the western United States. Findings from their study provided guidance on how organizations can increase the rates of employee involvement in voluntary development activities by making these activities readily accessible and by helping employees to develop positive attitudes toward development activities (Hurtz & Williams, 2009). Likewise, TRA and TPB theories would undergird

my research into the factors affecting AF civilian employee engagement in nonresident professional military education courses.

Luor, Hu, and Lu (2009) also used the TRA and TPB frameworks to explore the gap between intention and actual usage of corporate e-learning programs among employees at a Taiwanese financial institution. These researchers hypothesized that the higher an employee's intention toward using corporate e-learning programs, the higher would be an employee's actual usage of the development activities. The researchers were surprised to discover that an individual's intent to use the e-learning development program was not related to actual usage. Interview responses suggested that time management and technical problems were two barriers to completion of the development activities.

Little research has been conducted among Air Force civilians. However, Webb's (2008) investigation into the Air Force civilian promotion system identified deficiencies that may affect employees' attitudes toward participation in leadership development programs. Webb (2008) noted that the Air Force has no mechanism for ensuring that employees who complete leadership development programs are promoted. When filling civilian job vacancies, selecting officials are not required to discover which candidates are participants in leadership development programs (Webb, 2008). This hiring method increases the chances that an employee who has not completed the appropriate professional development program will be selected for a position over an employee who has participated in professional development. With the TRA and TPB frameworks as a backdrop, this deficiency in the Air Force's civilian promotion system may affect

employees' attitudes toward professional development in a manner that diminishes their intent to participate.

Several studies involving healthcare workers have examined employees' attitudes toward development activities. Ellis (2010) investigated the participation and attitudes toward development programs by dental technicians in Wales. All 258 registered dental technicians were invited to complete a Likert scale questionnaire investigating their perceptions toward continuing professional development. Seventy-nine questionnaires were analyzed revealing that lack of time, distance to locations offering professional development programs, and cost were factors that hindered participation in continuing professional development.

A qualitative study among public and private sector occupational therapists revealed that the perceived need for professional currency could be a factor in an employee's decision to participate in professional development activities (Murray & Lawry, 2011). For this study, the concept of professional currency was defined as "participation in activities for professional development and practice competency" (Murray & Lawry, 2011, p. 261). Researchers interviewed a focus group of 17 South Australian occupational therapists utilizing semistructured questions. The interview transcripts were independently read, and the data were coded and organized under the emerging themes. Murray and Lawry discussed their individual comments on the data until they reached an agreement on the meaning of the data. According to the researchers, self-determination was a factor that motivated the participants to involve themselves in development activities. Put another way; participants perceived they were

responsible for maintaining professional currency and chose activities that matched their professional currency goals (Murray & Lawry, 2011). Regarding the motivation for participating in development activities, one participant remarked, "I just decided it was important (Murray & Lawry, 2011, p. 263). In addition, respondents stated that contact with other occupational therapists during development activities helped to validate their frustrations and dilemmas and aided in providing a sense of security with other professionals who shared similar experiences. Barriers to participation in development opportunities included perceived capacity, work/life balance, accessibility, and workloads. Some of the respondents' perceived they were not skilled in conducting research, making formal presentations, and using information technology (Murray & Lawry, 2011). The study identified travel and attendance costs, computer access, and the time of day at which development activities occurred as participation barriers. Furthermore, respondents expressed concern about increasing the workloads of their workplace colleagues as they left the office to participate in development activities.

Cooper (2009) is convinced that retention and job satisfaction among nurses could be increased when healthcare institutions create a "culture of professional development" that fosters a personal commitment to lifelong learning (p. 501). As an example, Cooper (2009) highlighted one national survey that discovered a majority of nurses who planned to leave their positions within three years would consider staying longer if they were offered more professional development activities. However, even when employers offered development opportunities, barriers such as night work, staff shortages, and

cumbersome workloads made it difficult for nurses to participate (Gould et al., 2007; Jantzen, 2008, as cited in Cooper, 2009).

Gumus, Borkowski, Deckard, and Martel (2011) explored participation by healthcare managers in professional development activities. These researchers used data gathered from current and past members of three professional healthcare associations in the south Florida region. Out of the 675 members, 108 managers and executives completed the survey. The findings indicated a high value attributed to professional development by healthcare managers. Two-thirds of respondents would participate in professional development activities such as educational programs, workshops, or conferences even when employer funded reimbursement was not offered. Twenty-three percent of the managers surveyed believed that obtaining licensure/certification or advanced degrees would lead to a pay raise at their institution (Gumus et al., 2011).

Another study of healthcare workers examined perceptions of continuing professional development (CPD) for consultant doctors in England (Schostak et al., 2010). Researchers gathered data in several ways: an online Likert-type scale questionnaire, a semistructured email letter consisting of 13 questions, and one-on-one interviews conducted in-person or by telephone. Respondents ranked their preferences for particular CPD modalities and described their attitudes towards CPD. Nine hundred and two doctors returned the questionnaires, indicating, "the highest scoring attitudes towards CPD were that it was a natural part of professional life, which was necessary for patient safety and the extent to which it was considered rewarding" (Schostak et al., 2010, p. 587.). A majority of the respondents perceived that participation in CPD

resulted in changes to clinical practice, greater professional knowledge, and learner satisfaction. Also, all respondents regarded CPD as an essential element of effective practice and their development as practitioners, which may or may not enhance career progression. Perceived barriers to CPD participation included a lack of available time off for study, cost, and the ability to maintain proper work-life balance (Schostak, 2010).

As was the case with healthcare workers, many researchers focused their attention on how K-12 teachers perceived involvement in professional development. For example, a group of 42 kindergarten teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District recognized that participation in development programs encouraged collaboration among practitioners (Furtado, 2010). Concerning their involvement in a 5-day program focused on inquiry-based science teaching strategies, Furtado (2010) stated: "Both the novice and veteran teachers took the time the risk, and ownership of their learning by collaborating and sharing teaching experiences and artifacts to enhance their students' scientific literacy" (p. 119). Moreover, Furtado (2010) found that the teachers were motivated to engage in life-long learning and professional development out of a desire to reach their highest potential.

Buczynski and Hanson (2010, as cited in Shumack & Forde, 2011) performed a study among high school science teachers and discovered that the teachers valued professional development and found it to have a positive impact on classroom instruction. In another study, Frampton, Vaughn, and Didelot (2003, as cited in Shumack & Forde, 2011) discovered that over 30% of teacher participants were convinced that attendance at professional development schools made them better teachers.

Desimone (2011, as cited in Shumack & Forde, 2011) looked into the factors that spurred employee participation in professional development activities and found that public school math teachers with more extensive content knowledge participated at a higher rate than teachers with lower content knowledge. Regarding the relationship between teachers' years of experience and their level of participation in professional development, Yoon et al. (2007, as cited in Shumack & Forde, 2011) reported that teachers with three or fewer years of experience participated in fewer hours of professional development activities than teachers with higher levels of experience.

Harris (2008) performed an investigation among 114 Kansas school teachers to uncover their perceptions of the need for professional development activities. Teachers could choose to participate in a variety of Career Development Events (CDEs) at both the district and state level. Almost 85% of the respondents indicated an interest in attending a weeklong professional development workshop or a graduate course in CDE development. When considering whether to participate in CDEs such as Horse Evaluation, Agronomy, or Floriculture, teachers were more likely to participate in Career Development Events with which they felt familiar. In addition, Harris (2008) discovered that teacher participation in CDEs requiring qualification (i.e., district level CDEs) dropped by 30% as compared to participation in CDEs not requiring qualification. Harris theorized this decline might have been due to teachers not believing they possessed the knowledge to participate in CDEs requiring qualification. Going further, Harris (2008, p. 137) suggested that researchers "should examine different methods to deliver

professional development about CDE preparation to teachers such as short inservice [sic] or online training."

Higher education professionals, like K-12 educators, perceived participation in development activities in a variety of ways. Sanford, Dainty, Belcher, and Frisbee (2011) studied the willingness of part-time community college instructors to engage in professional development opportunities. Occupation education officers at community colleges in all 50 states comprised the target population. Responses to the self-developed survey instrument revealed that intrinsic and extrinsic rewards were important factors in encouraging part-time faculty to overcome obstacles to participation that included job commitments, travel distance, monetary compensation, and personal motivation (Sanford et al., 2011).

Stenfors-Hayes, Weurlander, Dahlgren, and Hult (2010) investigated the perceived barriers and opportunities for educational and professional development among 130 medical teachers at a research-intensive Swedish university. The researchers interviewed respondents for approximately 40-60 minutes each. The interviews were transcribed, and software (NVivo) was used to accomplish the qualitative analysis. The researchers applied an iterative process for assessing the similarities and differences in the interview data until a "negotiated consensus" was reached (Stenfors-Hayes et. al., 2010, p. 401). Researchers categorized the findings as individual, departmental, or institutional. At all three levels, respondents' attitudes toward opportunities for educational development were mostly positive. Freedom of work, collaboration and dialogue with colleagues, and the external demand on universities to provide professional

development courses were perceived as factors responsible for strengthening the availability of staff development activities. On the other hand, perceived barriers to participation in development activities at the departmental and institutional levels were a lack of incentives or support from management, pressure to engage in research activities, and a general lack of structure for educational development. One respondent perceived involvement in educational development to be difficult for teachers who did not possess enough knowledge of teaching and learning strategies (Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2010).

In their case study among contingent academic employees in Australia higher education institutions, Ryan and Bhattacharyya (2012) revealed that these employees were often excluded from development activities. Of the 127 emails sent to business and law faculty at an Australian regional university, 64 surveys were returned. Mean responses indicated that contingent academics were dissatisfied with the availability of formal professional development activities. The researchers posited that if these findings could be considered typical, Australian universities urgently need to undertake enhanced support and development programs for contingent academics.

Another study among 66 accounting teachers in New Zealand and Australia found that over 60% of the respondents agreed that continuing professional development (CPD) is essential for being a professional accounting teacher (Zajkowski, Sampson, & Davis, 2007). The researchers also noted that members of the New Zealand Institute of Chartered Accountants (NZICA) understand the value of continuing professional development and that CPD should be viewed, not as drudgery, but as a regular part of being a business professional (Zajkowski et al., 2007). Likewise, British researcher

Guthrie (2005, as cited in Zajkowski, Sampson, & Davis, 2007) determined that over 90% of UK management accounts "viewed CPD as an integral part of being a professional" (p. 407). Additionally, UK employers recognized that CPD had the power to enhance employee satisfaction, job performance, and performance standards.

Catalfamo (2010), a researcher with over 15 years' experience in public and private sector training and organizational development, distributed a survey that targeted administrators, support staff, and faculty at colleges in Ontario, Canada, who were engaged in various development activities. Catalfamo concluded that among the educational leaders surveyed, barriers to professional development included work-life balance issues, inadequate institutional resources, and organizational politicking.

Shifting the focus from employees' perspectives to those of the organization, researchers examined how an organization's commitment to employee professional development affected employee satisfaction and intrinsic motivation. For example, Kuvaas and Dysvik (2009) explored "alternative relationships between perceived investment in employee development, intrinsic motivation and different facets of work performance" (p. 217). In their article, Kuvass and Dysvik (2009) cited research indicating that employees may develop positive attitudes toward their employers when the organization is committed to employee development.

In a study that targeted 2,372 adult distance education students, 1,137 responses were gathered from a postal questionnaire asking respondents to indicate how many times during the previous 12 months they had participated in six types of formal training and development activities (Pajo, Coetzer, & Guenole, 2010). Results showed that

"participation in formal training and development activity is associated with enhanced perceptions of organizational support" (Pajo et al., 2010, p. 292). Likewise, a study by Lee and Bruvold (2003) examining nurses in a large Midwestern city and nurses at a public hospital in Singapore revealed that employees' perceptions of organizational investment in professional development opportunities mediated the employees' motivation for participating in professional development programs. The findings—that organizational support influences the rate of participation in development activities—comport with the results of several research studies previously described.

Researchers have conducted several foreign-based studies among employees in a variety of occupations and industries. For instance, Newman, Thanacoody, and Hui (2011) performed a study using a self-completion survey questionnaire targeting multinationals in the Chinese service sector. This study disclosed that support from both supervisors and co-workers was crucial for boosting participation in employee training programs. A survey carried out among 3,003 Korean employees at a wireless communications company showed that training/development opportunities were preferred more by employees desiring autonomy at work with the freedom to create their own service or product (Kim, 2005). In addition, a survey conducted across 11 universities in England investigated the factors affecting employee participation in development courses (Dunphy & Wilson, 2009). Sixty-eight respondents from among manual grade staff in higher education institutions identified 43 barriers to engaging in training sessions. The top 10 barriers included: no one explains the purpose of the courses, lack of encouragement from supervisors, did not know the courses were offered,

did not think the courses would be useful, and, too busy to attend (Dunphy & Wilson, 2009).

Perceptions of lifelong learning and professional development were the focus of a study conducted among public sector professionals from six Asian nations: Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Philippines, and Singapore (Mokhtar, 2010). Eighteen participants in a one-year professional development program were identified and selected by way of convenience sampling. Seven questions were posed in interviews lasting from 20 to 30 minutes. Respondents' answers were audio-recorded and transcribed; field notes were taken, and recurring themes from the respondents' answers were identified and coded. Mokhtar (2010) quoted respondents who perceived that professional development opportunities were limited and usually not funded by the government. Limited availability and financial constraints were, therefore, seen as barriers to participation in development programs. Moreover, respondents perceived their organizations gave professional development or lifelong learning opportunities mostly to senior employees and that professional development participation did not add value to their job performance (Mokhtar, 2010).

Another foreign-based study by Zoogah (2010) approached involvement in development activities from a disadvantage perspective. In other words, instead of investigating engagement in development activities from the standpoint of an employee's desire to enhance their current and future advantages, Zoogah's research focused on an employee's desire to remedy their perceived weaknesses. Zoogah (2010) sampled 144 employees from 27 companies in Ghana. His findings suggest that involvement in

professional development activities increases when employees understand they have control over their participation in development activities regardless whether the employee's intention to participate was high or low. This finding is in keeping with TPB, which posits the necessity of volitional control in the expression of behavioral intention (Ajzen, 1991; Chennamaneni, 2006).

Olatoye (2011) examined engagement in professional development activities by Nigerian professionals who were deficient in their utilization of information and communication technology (ICT). ICT devices included such things as the Internet, cellular phones, electronic bulletin boards, video conferencing equipment and other types of devices. Likert-type questionnaires gathered data from 477 participants in three areas: (a) level of participation in training activities, (b) level of computer anxiety, and (c) rate of ICT utilization. Among the occupations represented by the study participants—banking, teaching, broadcasting, and healthcare—bankers had the highest levels of participation in ICT training and ICT utilization, while medical workers had the lowest levels. Because this quantitative study did not include a qualitative component, no interview data was collected to explore the differing levels of participation in ICT training and utilization across the occupations represented.

Ardts, van der Velde, and Maurer (2010) looked at employees' perceptions of management development programs within seven organizations in the Netherlands. The findings suggested that appreciation for management development was less among employees who do not perceive they have some control over the content of the program,

possibly resulting in diminished motivation for participating in the management development programs.

The impact of an employee's age on participation in professional development programs has also garnered the attention of researchers. In fact, the aging of the civilian workforce has heightened the Air Force's focus on civilian development. In 2007, 46.3% of government workers were 45 years of age or older (Center for the Organizational Research, 2001, as cited in Webb, 2008). In 2007, the Air Force Personnel Center discovered that 62% of Senior Executive Service leaders were retirement eligible within five years. At the time of this study, 41% percent of Air Force civilians at the strategic and operational levels were retirement eligible in five years (Webb, 2008). Therefore, organizations should not overlook factors that influence how older employees perceive participation in professional development opportunities.

Findings from data collected by Vianen, Dalhoeven, and Pater (2011) suggested that employees' avoidance orientations and perceived developmental support influenced the participation rates of older employees in development activities. The researchers obtained data from 208 employees and 30 supervisors working in a medium-sized public city council in the Netherlands. Findings from the study indicated that older workers were less willing to participate in organization-requested development activities than younger workers. In accordance with the researchers' earlier proposal, age was negatively related to employees' willingness to participate in developmental activities when the employees' avoidance orientation was high and when developmental support from their supervisors was weak (Vianen et al., 2011).

Also, in this area, a small phenomenological study conducted by Australian researchers Meyers, Billett, and Kelly (2010) uncovered a myriad of institutional and personal factors that shaped mature-aged workers' participation in training programs (The researchers noted that a phenomenological approach was the best way to investigate the participants' own motivations and interests.) The principal research question that guided the study was, "What are the learning needs and factors that motivate and engage mature-aged workers to participate in a training program?" (Meyers et al., 2010, p. 121). The eight participants ranged in age from 45-64 years and were involved in an accredited training program at the time of the study. The researchers conducted semistructured interviews featuring open-ended questions. Institutional factors that both positively and negatively affected older workers' participation in training programs included age discrimination, skills obsolescence, fewer development opportunities made available to older workers, and industry regulatory requirements to gain and maintain employment. Personal factors affecting mature-aged workers' perceptions included emotional, physical, and social learning needs, and workers' expectations of training programs based on their previous experiences. In acknowledging the limitations of their small study, the researchers concluded that larger future studies could provide comprehensive insights into the factors that shape the decisions by mature-aged employees to participate in formal training programs (Meyers et al., 2010).

## Implications

Data collected in this study have the potential to help Air Force leaders understand civilian employees' attitudes and opinions toward nonresident PME. Air

Force leaders may use this data for developing policies and resources to help civilians overcome perceived barriers to nonresident PME participation. For instance, unit commanders could be authorized to allow on-duty time for civilians to complete professional development courses. This kind of social change could help motivate civilians to participate in nonresident PME. Also, this study could form the basis for more extensive studies examining the efficacy of nonresident PME for civilian leadership development. Thus far, there have been no studies, Air Force sponsored or otherwise, that give voice to civilians regarding their perceptions of participation in nonresident PME.

The findings will be forwarded to Air University and the Air Force Personnel Center by way of an electronic staff summary sheet (eSSS). Each of these agencies plays an indispensable role in the development and administration of policies, programs, and professional development courses essential to civilian leadership development across the Air Force. In addition to sending the eSSS, I hope to conduct in-person or web-based briefings to allow key administrators to ask questions and provide feedback regarding the study's findings.

## Summary

Civilian employees play crucial roles in the execution of U.S. national and international policy objectives; therefore, the Department of Defense (DoD) has developed many innovative programs to build civilian leaders who can perform skillfully in an environment of ever-changing global concerns and shrinking operational budgets. Specifically, the Air Force understands that civilian employees are indispensable to

carrying out its mission to fly, fight, and win. Hence, Air Force leaders expect civilians to participate in nonresident PME courses as part of their foundational leadership development. These development courses, SOS, ACSC, and AWC, are available at no cost to eligible employees in grades GS-9 and above.

Statistics in 2013 indicated that a little over 9% of Air Force civilians have completed nonresident PME. In fact, the rate of civilian participation in nonresident PME at a large southwestern U.S. Air Force installation was less than 3%. Although these low levels of participation exist, I have not discovered any studies that investigated how civilians perceive participation in PME.

Even though there are no formal studies of civilian participation in Air Force PME, many researchers have examined employees' perceptions of involvement in professional development activities across a myriad of occupations, industries, and cultures. Researchers discovered that employees often perceived continuing development activities to be valuable for their professional growth. However, employees often cited reasons such as cost, availability, time constraints, distance, and lack of organizational support as barriers to participation in professional development opportunities.

This study investigated the attitudes and opinions of Air Force permanent civil service employees who work on a large installation in the southwestern United States toward nonresident PME courses. Section 2 explains the research design and approach, the population and sample, as well as the data collection methods and analysis. Section 3 provides a comprehensive review of the project study and, finally, Section 4 contains an analysis of the project's strengths and weaknesses, implications, applications, and

directions for future research, reflections about myself as a researcher, and an overall reflection on the importance of the work for bringing about social change.

Section 2: The Methodology

## Introduction

Senior Air Force leaders have expressed the importance of nonresident Professional Military Education PME completion for eligible civilian employees (Hughes, 2009). However, Air Force personnel demographics for 2013 indicated that approximately 9.2% of full-time civilians Air Force-wide had completed at least one PME course. Furthermore, in 2013, the Air University enrollment database indicated a civilian nonresident PME completion rate of approximately 2.6% among civilian employees on the installation to which I was assigned at the time of this study. In light of these modest completion rates, this study uncovered and examined the attitudes and opinions of nonresident Professional Military Education (PME) held by Air Force civil service employees assigned to a large installation in the southwestern United States.

This section explains the qualitative study that was performed among a convenience sample of 12 civilians in pay grades GS-09 to GS-13. The theories of reasoned action and planned behavior undergirded the central research question and five survey subquestions, which are described in detail. The data was manually searched for emerging themes and recurring patterns. Major themes emerged from the data related to employee awareness of nonresident PME course content, perceived barriers to course completion, level of organizational support, perceived value of nonresident PME for leadership development, and the role of PME for the attainment of career goals.

Limitations related to scope and generalizability are discussed along with measures taken to ensure the quality of the data. Finally, procedures taken to protect the identity and rights of participants are explained.

## Research Design and Approach

A qualitative design was used to explore civilian employees' perceptions of nonresident PME. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative researchers "are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 5). Qualitative research typically utilizes an inductive approach that builds concepts, hypotheses, and theories after the start of data collection (Creswell, 2009; Lodico et al., 2010; Merriam, 2009). Moreover, qualitative researchers identify a theoretical framework to undergird the formulation of research questions, selection of a research design, and identification of data collection and analysis strategies (Merriam, 2009; Glesne, 2011).

Therefore, I determined that a qualitative design was appropriate for these reasons: First, the purpose of the study was to understand how Air Force civilians think about participation in nonresident PME, not merely to find out how many civilians have participated or intend to participate in nonresident PME, which could have been discovered through a simple survey. Through face-to-face interviews, I probed the opinions, perceptions, and attitudes civilian employees have toward nonresident PME as a foundational part of their leadership development. A quantitative approach would most likely not have provided this kind of richly descriptive data (Merriam, 2009). Moreover, a quantitative approach is typically used by researchers attempting to determine cause

and effect and to predict the occurrence of an event or attribute across a population (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010; Merriam, 2009). Quantitative researchers often form a hypothesis, collect, and analyze numeric data, and then decide whether to accept or reject the hypothesis (Lodico et al., 2010). These aspects of quantitative research did not align well with the purpose of this study.

The second rationale for using a quantitative approach was that the theories of reasoned action (TRA) and planned behavior (TPB) formed the theoretical lens that influenced the central research question and subquestions, which are as follows:

*Central Question:*

What are AF civilian employees' perceptions of nonresident Professional Military Education (PME) courses?

*Subquestions:*

1. How do civilian employees perceive their capacity to complete nonresident PME?
2. How do civilian employees perceive organizational support for participation in nonresident PME?
3. What do civilians know about the structure, content, and availability of nonresident PME courses?
4. How do civilians perceive the inclusion of nonresident PME as a foundational part of civilian leadership development?
5. How do civilian employees perceive the importance of nonresident PME completion for the attainment of their professional and career goals?

These questions demonstrate the purpose of this study was not to test these theoretical constructs but to gather data from which theories or concepts regarding employees' perceptions toward nonresident PME may emerge. This inductive approach is often an essential element of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009).

Finally, several situational limitations dictated the use of a qualitative approach in place of a quantitative or mixed-methods approach. First, the Air Force and the DoD do not permit access to official employee lists for research that is not officially endorsed by the Air Force or the DoD. Therefore, I was not able to access a list of Air Force employees to whom a quantitative survey would be sent. Second, the installation's computer network administrators would not allow me to send a mass email to employees with a link to an external survey site such as SurveyMonkey® due to network security reasons. Third, the cost to mail a survey to each participant along with an envelope and return postage was prohibitive. It

## Participants

This study was conducted among civilian employees assigned to an Air Force directorate comprised of manpower, personnel, and services professionals at an installation in the southwestern United States. In this directorate were 51 employees in pay grades GS-09 to GS-14, which are the pay grades eligible for participation in nonresident officer PME. Reviews of the study proposal conducted by the Air Education and Training Command (AETC) Legal Office and the Air Force Survey Office determined that applicable DoD and Air Force ethics regulations prohibited use of government-owned computers and email systems to recruit participants. In addition, the

AETC Legal Office ruled that I could only invite employees I knew personally, which prevented me from inviting a random sample of employees assigned to either my specific organization or to the installation at large. Furthermore, DoD ethics regulations required that interview appointments be scheduled to occur after official duty hours and to be conducted in the workplace at a location separate from the participants' work areas.

Written permission to access participants was requested in writing from the director of the AETC Directorate of Manpower, Personnel, and Services, the agency to which I was assigned in a nonsupervisory education services specialist position. This request for access included the same information provided in the informed consent form so that the agency director was fully aware of what the study entailed. Furthermore, this written permission was acquired before contacting any prospective participants and will be kept on file for a minimum of five years along with all other project documents. After five years, the documents will be destroyed.

Written invitations were emailed to prospective participants by way of their nongovernment email addresses with an attached Informed Consent Form (Appendix C), explaining the research project's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, confidentiality, risks, and benefits. Signed Informed Consent Forms were obtained from each participant and placed on file. In addition, participants were provided copies of their signed consent forms.

Initially, I invited a targeted convenience sample of 15 Air Force civilian employees known personally by me that I believed would provide information-rich data. I estimated this sample size would provide adequate coverage of the attitudes, opinions,

and perceptions of the participants and could be adjusted during the study if needed, as suggested by Merriam (2009). Ultimately, the final sample size was determined by informational considerations: the sample size was capped when no new information emerged from interviews with participants, in alignment with Merriam's (2009) guidelines.

A convenience sampling approach—a variant of purposeful sampling—was justified for four reasons: First, it was not the goal of this research to generalize results statistically from the sample to the population from which the sample was taken. I will report the data and findings locally to the organization's director for review and discussion. The director may then forward the report to Air University administrators at Maxwell AFB, AL for their consideration.

Second, I wanted to learn as much as I could about civilian employees' perceptions of nonresident PME. Purposeful sampling aided in selecting participants from whom the most could be learned. Third, in purposeful sampling, I could determine the participant attributes essential to the study and target a unit that was rich with people possessing those qualities. Probability sampling does not afford the same level of control when selecting participants as mentioned by Merriam (2009). And, fourth, the Air Force would not permit me to access an official list of employees constituting the realistic population from which a random sample would be selected.

Twelve of the 15 invited employees were interviewed. The 12 participants were in pay grades GS-09 (2), GS-11 (2), GS-12 (6), and GS-13 (2). Three of the participants had no prior military experience, eight participants had prior enlisted military experience,

and one participant had prior military officer experience. Five participants had not completed any nonresident PME courses. Of those five, three participants had enrolled in at least one nonresident PME course but did not finish. Seven participants had completed at least one nonresident PME course; however, two of the seven had not completed the nonresident PME course commensurate with their pay grades (ACSC). One of these seven participants had completed the ACSC online master's program, and another participant was in the final course of the ACSC master's program.

To foster positive researcher-participant relationships, I refrained from making off the cuff remarks that could have been deemed disrespectful or judgmental toward the participants as their predispositions, biases, and attitudes were revealed during the interviews. I also assured each participant there were no right or wrong answers to the interview questions. This assurance, along with a professional, friendly disposition, fostered a non-threatening environment in which participants could feel at ease. Finally, no inducements, benefits or compensation were offered to the participants and was clearly stated in the informed consent form.

## Data Collection

I conducted interviews to investigate the central research question: What are Air Force civilian employees' perceptions of nonresident Professional Military Education (PME) courses? The five guiding questions used to investigate the central research question were shaped by two theories utilized by behavioral scientists to explain human behavior: the theory of reasoned action (TRA) and the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Langdridge et al., 2007). In line with TRA and TPB, the central question and five

subquestions were crafted to investigate how the participants perceived the value of nonresident PME courses for their personal leadership development and attainment of career goals, how they perceived support for nonresident PME participation from their colleagues and supervisors, and how they viewed their ability to complete nonresident PME courses.

In keeping with the nature of qualitative research as described by Merriam (2009), the questions were designed to explore how participants perceived nonresident PME, not to determine the causes of nonresident PME participation or how many employees have completed or intend to complete nonresident PME. For that reason, the interviews emphasized the importance of each participant's opinions and experiences to understand the diverse ways in which participants gave meaning to participation in nonresident PME as part of their foundational leadership development). Indeed, the data collected revealed factors that influenced participants' decisions to participate or not to take part in nonresident PME courses.

A person's intention to take part in a particular behavior is affected by their attitudes toward the activity, other people's opinions of engaging in the activity, and the person's actual or perceived ability to engage in the activity (i.e., volitional control; Ajzen, 1991; Chennamaneni, 2006; Hurtz & Williams, 2009). Thus, the interview subquestions explored how participants perceived their capacity to complete distance-learning PME, their perceptions of organizational support for participation in nonresident PME, their awareness of the structure and availability of nonresident PME courses, and

participants' perceptions of the importance of nonresident PME completion for attaining their professional and career goals.

Although researchers have touted the usefulness of pilot studies for trying out a particular research instrument or clarifying research statements (Glesne, 2011; Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001), I did not believe that a pilot study was necessary prior to conducting this small scale study. It should be noted, however, that Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) pointed out that qualitative data collection is often progressive. In accordance with this axiom, insights from the first three or four interviews helped me improve the follow-up questions as the study progressed.

Prior to the interviews, I provided a written summary to each participant that described the research project in detail and included the following elements recommended by Lodico et al. (2010, p. 148): "detailed description of the project, description of any potential risks involved, the involuntary nature of the study, and a confidentiality statement." Also, informed consent was obtained in writing from each participant (Appendix C).

A separate file for each participant containing interview notes, transcriptions, and other pertinent documentation was kept in a secure location away from the workplace. A reflective journal was also maintained throughout the study as suggested by Jootun, McGhee, and Marland (2009). Through an ongoing process of critical reflection, I became aware of my beliefs, values, and judgments related to the research project. o Jootun, McGhee, and Marland (2009) mentioned that this type of critical reflection helps researchers ground judgments in the actual data collected from participants, not in the

researcher's own belief system. This deliberation ensured that I accurately described the meaning subjects gave to participation in nonresident PME.

Use of an interview protocol sheet (Appendix Dl) ensured that standard procedures were maintained from one interview to the next. The interview protocol included the date, location, participant's numeric identification, interview questions, and spaces for notes, as recommended by Creswell (2009). Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed to provide the best database for analysis, per Merriam's (2009) guidelines. Transcribing the interviews was very time-consuming for this project, so I hired a professional transcriber to perform a large percentage of the work. Each transcript was read through while listening to the original audio recording for validation.

My professional role in the organization and professional role with the participants did not affect my ability to gather data that was accurate and natural. I am in a nonsupervisory, midlevel administrative position; therefore, there was no chance of interviewing a subordinate employee. Furthermore, I made sure that my direct supervisor was not selected to participate in the study to preclude the appearance to my co-workers of any conflict of interest.

Finally, since I have completed the nonresident PME course for which I am eligible, I was mindful that bias could enter into the study. For that reason, I was vigilant not to allow my personal experience to affect how I conducted interviews and interpreted the data. During the interviews, some participants expressed attitudes and opinions toward nonresident PME with which I did not agree. However, I was cautious not react to these opposing viewpoints in a manner that was judgmental or insensitive.

**Interview Procedures**

The initial research plan was to conduct semistructured, in-person interviews with 15 of the 51 GS-09 to GS-14 employees (Merriam, 2009). In the end, however, eight face-to-face interviews were conducted in a location on the installation away from the participants' office work areas, and four other interviews were conducted by phone for the convenience of the participants with busy schedules. Interviews lasted 60 minutes on average. A small number of field notes were recorded during the interviews, and the interviews were digitally recorded with the participants' consent. To ensure confidentiality, participants' names or other personally identifiable information were not used in the field notes, during the recorded interviews, or in the interview transcripts (participants were identified as A1, A2, A3, etc.). Moreover, all collected data was maintained on an encrypted external hard drive and stored in a secure cabinet.

All interviews were semistructured and conducted using an interview protocol to foster a systematic and focused approach to the data collection as recommended by Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle (2010). Each participant was asked five subquestions of the main research question, which served as a starting point for the interviews. Responses to the five subquestions were followed up with probing questions that allowed participants to clarify their responses and to provide additional detailed information–a technique described by Creswell (2009) and Lodico et al. (2010). The probing questions were not constructed beforehand but were extemporaneously posed to participants' during the interviews.

During the interviews, I carefully evaluated the actions I took with participants to mitigate the occurrence of unanticipated outcomes. For example, if the interview interaction proved to be uncomfortable for some of the participants, I would have immediately stopped the interview and made any adjustments to put the participant at ease, to include allowing the participant to drop out of the study. Fortunately, no situation of this type arose during the participant interviews.

As data was collected and preliminarily analyzed, it was evident that informational saturation was reached at 12 interviews. Sandelowski (2008) defined informational saturation or redundancy as the point when data is repeated so often that the researcher can anticipate it. In my judgment, the patterns in the data collected would have continued without providing any new information if additional interviews had been conducted.

## Data Analysis

Creswell (2012) noted that transcripts fewer than 500 pages are suitable for hand analysis. In this study, the transcribed interviews produced 127 pages of text. Therefore, even the though the hand analysis proved to be somewhat cumbersome; computer software was not used to analyze the qualitative data. However, word processor software, as suggested by Merriam (2009), aided in the cutting, pasting, and sorting of data units into electronic file folders.

Utilizing procedures outlined by Creswell (2012); Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle (2010); and Merriam (2009), each transcript was read through without making any notations in order to gain an early feel for the participants' perspectives. During the

second read through each transcript, notes were made next to meaningful pieces of data that appeared to be relevant to answering the research questions. These segments were color coded and labeled with descriptive terms, then summarized and organized according to the major categories, or themes, that emerged from the data. Recurring themes or codes were grouped into tentative categories that were maintained as a running list on a separate document. These themes revealed organizational frameworks to aid me in interpreting and explaining the interview data.

As the data analysis progressed, categories were renamed, and subcategories under the major categories became evident. This in-depth analysis identified 30 codes. Subsequent analyses eliminated redundancies and reduced the list to 15 codes that described the recurring patterns or relationships that cut across the data. These codes were then grouped under five major themes and seven subthemes arising out of the data.

To assure the best possible accuracy and credibility of the findings, interview transcripts and research summaries were forwarded to the participants for their review. In addition, I asked a colleague to examine the field notes periodically and to pose questions about the data analysis in order to uncover some alternate ways of looking at the data. Finally, as recommended by Morrow (2005), I conducted an extensive search of the data for cases that did not fit with my explanation of the data and revised the data categories until all of the participants' experiences were reflected.

## Methodology Summary

This study used a qualitative approach to explore Air Force civilian employees' perceptions of participation in nonresident PME. Participants were selected by way of

convenience sampling. Data was collected through in-person and over the phone audiotaped interviews among GS-09 to GS-13 employees in an Air Force manpower, personnel, and services directorate. The proposed sample size of 15 participants was reduced to 12, which provided adequate coverage of the attitudes, opinions, and perceptions of the participants. The data were searched for recurring themes and patterns and grouped into categories that emerged from the data. No problems in gaining access to the participants were encountered. Member checks and peer debriefing were employed to assure the credibility of the study.

## Limitations

The scope of the study was to investigate the attitudes and opinions of nonresident PME held by civil service employees with the intent to present the findings to the appropriate Air Force senior leaders. The study focused on employees' familiarity with the content and availability of nonresident PME courses, external barriers to nonresident PME completion, perceived organizational support for PME participation, and the role of PME courses for leadership development and attainment of personal career goals. The intent of the study was not to discover correlations between employees' perceptions of nonresident PME and factors such as age, gender, occupational series, ethnicity, supervisory/nonsupervisory status, prior military service, and so forth. In addition, the focus of the study was not to collect data on behalf of the Air Force to be used for the modification of any PME courses. Any data provided by the participants outside of the study's scope were excluded from the data analysis.

Furthermore, the study's small sample size precludes extending the findings and conclusions to the population of Air Force civilian employees at large. However, the richness of the data may allow readers to make connections between the study's results and their own perceptions and experiences.

## Findings

### Research Question 1

*Please explain what you know about the structure, content, and availability of nonresident PME courses.* Eleven of the 12 participants said they were familiar with the structure and content of nonresident PME courses. All 12 participants stated that eligibility requirements and application procedures were readily available on the Air University web site. Participant A7 was not acquainted with the content and structure of nonresident PME courses but was aware of the eligibility requirements and how to apply.

Two of the five participants who had not completed at least one nonresident PME course provided brief statements summarizing their familiarity with the course content. A2 stated, "Nonresident PME grows the Air Force person beyond just technical expertise in their career field in the areas of management, personnel—those kinds of things." A6 mentioned that "the structure and the content is training in the military structure, what's the squadron, what's the unit, what's the ranks, the art of war, the art of military training, and so forth."

Some of the participants described the content of nonresident SOS in somewhat negative terms. For example, Participant A5, who had enrolled in nonresident SOS but did not finish, remarked, "I thought it didn't really have any academic structure. It was

just a bunch of articles that you had to read, and then you had to take three tests. It was decent, but I didn't too much care for it because there were just articles in there and they would pull questions from the articles." A4, who enrolled in both nonresident SOS and ACSC without completing either course, stated that the ACSC "content was very dry (puts you to sleep)." Another participant close to finishing the ACSC online master's program said, "But I must say what they teach in the program is not really here in the field. It is not anywhere close to them. When you are talking about leadership and what should be expected or how we should respond to our leaders and how we should respond to our leaders and how a good leadership accepts our recommendations…it is not the way it is. I mean it is the way it should be, but it is just not that way." This participant went on to say that the online ACSC course had more academic value than practical value.

A follow-up question that asked about participants' perceptions of how well the Air Force advertised the availability of nonresident PME courses produced mixed responses. Of the seven participants that offered an opinion, four believed that the Air Force does a good job of advertising the availability of the courses. For example, A3 stated that the Air Force has conducted a big push of information out to civilians and that there is a good website on which the information is available. Another participant observed, "Every employee is notified by email of the availability." Participant A10 believed that the Air Force does a good job of advertising the availability of nonresident PME courses as evidenced by the recent Air Force-wide webinar and the easily accessible website providing course information. In addition to emails, webinars, and websites, A12 added that the installation's Education Office publicized nonresident PME

courses in its periodic newsletters. Furthermore, A12 is convinced that the average civilian employee is aware that nonresident PME courses exist.

In A8's opinion, the Air Force did an "average job" of advertising nonresident PME courses. Other than the Air Force Personnel Center's annual call for civilian developmental education participation, A8 mentioned not having seen any information about nonresident PME courses. A9 believed the Air Force relies too heavily on supervisors getting the word out who may be biased in their opinions of nonresident PME depending on their participation or nonparticipation. A10 had not seen any publicity related to nonresident PME courses and commented that only employees following the Air Force's Civilian Development Continuum chart would know about these professional development opportunities.

**Research Question 2**

*What is your opinion regarding your ability to complete nonresident PME (e.g., computer skills, writing skills, ability to work alone, etc.)?* The research studies highlighted in the earlier literature review revealed that employees often cited reasons such as cost, availability, time constraints, distance, and lack of organizational support as barriers to participation in professional development opportunities. In this study, the seven participants that had completed at least one distance learning PME course all said they experienced no external barriers that impeded their ability to complete the course. However, that is not to say that some of the participants did not feel a modicum of uncertainty before enrolling in the PME courses.

For example, Participant A3 remarked, “I had small children when doing ACSC. It was a challenge to take time away from them. It would be a challenge to do it now because of family but I would still do it.” Participant A10 stated, “Before enrolling in SOS I occasionally had fear about balancing work, family, and so forth. Therefore, I knew I had to keep up because things can come up unexpectedly.” Participant A9, who failed to complete nonresident SOS twice but finished ACSC and AWC, said, “Air Command and Staff College was much more computer oriented, and I have to mention I was worried about being able to do that successfully.” Another Participant, A11, did not encounter barriers to completing the distance learning SOS course but was unsure about how much effort and time it would take to complete the course. A11 commented, “I wasn’t sure how much of a challenge it would be, so it was a little scary in that sense and how much effort and off duty time really that I would put in the course…however, during the course, I realized there really wasn’t anything to worry about after all.”

The five participants who had not completed any nonresident PME course did not identify any external barriers to successfully completing PME courses. Likewise, the two participants that had completed at least one nonresident PME course but had not yet completed the PME course commensurate with their pay grade said they knew of no external barriers to completing another nonresident PME course.

Notwithstanding the absence of external barriers, all five participants not having completed at least one PME course mentioned that a lack of motivation was an internal barrier to completing distance learning PME courses. For example, A2 possessed the computer and academic skills to complete nonresident PME but said that lack of

motivation is the problem. A second participant attributed his lack of motivation to the absence of an appropriate external motivator: "Hey, you complete your PME, we are going to give you $100 per month extra. That's a motivator!" A5 confidently proclaimed that he had the ability to complete PME; however, he went on to say, "I just hate tests and I hate writing papers."

Participant A6, who enrolled in, but failed to complete both SOS and ACSC asserted, "They are not that hard to complete if you are used to going to school and studying. My problem was interest and motivation. The material was not interesting to me. A6 went on to make this unexpected comment, "I am not interested in the way the military works, the military structure, battlefield maneuvers and battlefield tactics or air power or any of those things. The only reason I enrolled in this is my bosses wanted me to complete them." Finally, A7 stated the he was satisfied with his pay grade; therefore, he had no desire to enroll in PME courses, which he believed would be required to attain higher management positions.

**Research Question 3**

*What is your opinion about your organization's support for civilian participation in nonresident PME?* Previous studies indicated that employee perceptions of organizational support influenced their attitudes and opinions toward professional development activities. In this study, perceptions of organizational support ranged from "very poor" to "very good." Opinions among the participants that had not completed at least one PME course were, for the most part, positive. Participant A4 commented that organizational support is very good as long as you can do it on your own time. In other

words, A4 did not believe that the organization provided time during work hours to complete nonresident PME coursework. Participant A9, the only employee interviewed who had completed nonresident AWC, remarked, "I think the higher I got, the more support there was. It could be that at higher GS levels you are with supervisors and leaders who have done it themselves, and they got it and understand it and they saw the value in it."

On the other hand, Participants A2 and A6 were confident that their supervisors would provide some on-duty time to complete PME assignments. Participant A6 commented further that a previous supervisor was a great believer in PME participation for an employee's professional development and that, overall, civilian PME participation is well supported by the Air Force. Likewise, Participant A7 assumed the organization would be supportive if he chose to participate in nonresident PME; however, he chose not to participate. Participant A5 did not know anyone enrolled in nonresident PME and, therefore, could not judge the level of organizational support. However, he was confident that his immediate organization and the broader Air Force support PME involvement by civilians. In addition to expressing a positive view of organizational support, Participant A11 went on to say that the installation commander is very interested in convincing civilians to participate in PME and is searching for ways to increase civilian PME participation.

In contrast to these positive perceptions, Participant A1 stated, without elaboration, that organizational support is very weak. Participant A11, who completed nonresident SOS, asserted that organizational support is poor. "I know they have like a

standard setup, developing civilians, but I think the Air Force needs to be much more proactive in giving civilians these plans and these skills and really try to help develop them along the way," stated A11 who went on to say, "I think maybe Civilian Personnel…should play a greater role in helping people learn how to develop themselves along the way." Participant A8, currently enrolled in the online ACSC master's program, stated that organizational support needs to be improved and rated organizational support as a "minus 10" on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being poor and 10 being excellent. A8 continued, "I haven't gotten anything from the organization other than completing, I guess, the application and getting a signature for endorsement, but no one has approached me since then to ask me how I am doing, if I am close to completion, am I a dropout, what's my status, no one has approached me and asked me anything."

It is interesting to note that many of the participants mentioned receiving little encouragement throughout their careers from supervisors to enroll in nonresident PME courses. I discovered three participants had never been approached by a supervisor or colleague to discuss enrollment in nonresident PME. For example, Participant A11 remarked, "There is no mentorship at all, so you are kind of on your own to figure it out." Participant A2, who has never been counseled about PME participation, stated, "Employees should, at a minimum, be told about what professional development they are eligible for at the stage in their career."

Seven participants recalled receiving guidance from only one supervisor during their civil service careers. Participant A10 remembered having only "one person, maybe a decade ago, tell about the availability of nonresident PME but there was no

encouragement to enroll." Furthermore, according to A10, "I have not heard or seen a supervisor or someone in the workplace talk to anyone about PME." Participant A4 asserted that PME enrollment had never been mentioned during performance appraisal time or in casual conversations with his current supervisor. And, Participant A5 admitted that no supervisor had ever pushed him to complete nonresident PME.

The two remaining Participants, A7 and A12, both described receiving encouragement to enroll in nonresident PME from multiple supervisors. A12 went on to say that before enrolling in nonresident PME, his supervisor met with him to discuss his overall professional development plan. A12 was the only participant to have this kind of discussion with a supervisor.

**Research Question 4**

*What is your perception of nonresident PME as a foundational part of your civilian leadership development?* Overall, attitudes toward nonresident PME completion in the context of an employee's leadership development were mixed. The five participants not having completed at least one PME course perceived participation in nonresident PME to be of little benefit for their leadership development (It is important to note that four of these five participants had prior active duty military service.)

Participant A4 asserted that nonresident PME courses would teach the same material he had learned in enlisted PME courses, which, he believed, had equipped him with the leadership and management skills needed to perform his Air Force mission. Nevertheless, A4 recommended that Air Force employees without prior military service complete nonresident SOS. Participant A5, also a retired enlisted person, remarked,

"PME has the potential of enhancing [leadership skills], depending on the curriculum, but then it also has a potential of wasting time being just too redundant." Likewise, Participant A2 believed that nonresident PME is beneficial but also stated that it would likely rehash material from enlisted PME courses. Participant A7 commented, "Because I have spent so much time in the Air Force on active duty that I got a lot of it from enlisted PME; therefore, I don't need the lower level PME to advance." Participant A6, who had no prior military service, stated, "my experience and my education has prepared me for a leadership position in my field…I don't see it as being beneficial."

Of the seven participants that had completed at least on nonresident PME course, only one Participant, A11 (prior military service), had a negative view of nonresident PME. A11 said, "Again, for me as a civilian taking SOS, it didn't bring a lot to the table for me…actually when I was active duty as an enlisted person and doing PME that way, so I don't think PME has a value to it, because, for me, it didn't add as much because I already had a background."

Six employees that had completed nonresident PME expressed positive opinions of nonresident PME. Participant A1 commented that nonresident PME improved his ability to speak the "Air Force lingo" and provided him greater credibility with colleagues. Participant A3 said, "When I took ACSC I was a first-time supervisor, so it was good opportunity to just learn the basics of leadership…PME helps you see the big picture." Participant A8, currently enrolled in the nonresident ACSC master's program, conveyed a favorable opinion of nonresident PME with statements like these: "I think it lays a very good foundation, especially if you are from an organization where there is no

mentorship…Could I be what the Air Force expects me to be? Probably not, because like I said it brought a lot of different perspectives on leadership and how we should conduct ourselves and how we should relate to different situations."

Participant A9, when referring to nonresident ACSC and AWC, remarked, "The courses were good but not necessarily targeted to me as a civilian and being able to use it…it helped me understand some of the issues that are important to the Air Force…it made me a better leader." Participant A10 stated that PME was very helpful. "I enjoyed reading the material about leadership management. It was nice to read about the way things should work." Finally, Participant A12 observed, "I think it's important because PME for civilians [sic] you get to see your military how your military counterpart operates and what is expected because we are supposed to be one organization." A12 also commented that prior enlisted should also complete nonresident officer PME (i.e., SOS, ACSC, and AWC) because officers see the big picture in a little different way from how enlisted members see it.

**Research Question 5**

*How do you perceive the importance of nonresident PME completion for the attainment of your professional and career goals?* Nine of the 12 participants did not believe that nonresident PME completion was critical for the attainment of their professional and career goals. In other words, a majority of the participants believed that PME completion is not essential to secure promotions in their career fields.

For example, Participant A2 will not participate in nonresident PME if personal career goals can be achieved without it. When commenting on the importance of

nonresident PME for career progression, A2 stated, “As a person with more than 20 years of military experience, who is bringing along a whole boat load of experience already, which as a civilian, I am being hired for my experience and ability to do the job, which was already learned, paid for, and trained back when on active duty.” Participant A3, who has completed SOS and ACSC, was convinced that the need to complete nonresident PME to be promoted depends on the emphasis placed on it by different leaders. A3 continued, “I see people more oftentimes than not getting promoted without completing PME. It is not consistent. It may help you and it may not. Depends on who is hiring. I am aware there are [GS] 14s and [GS] 15s without PME.”

Similarly, Participant A5 believed that the importance of PME completion for attaining personal career goals is connected to a hiring official’s perception of PME. A5 posited, “PME has to be important to the particular hiring official. If PME is not important to them, then it is not going to make a difference.” A5 also claimed, “I haven’t seen anybody that I know of that has completed a PME on the civilian side get promoted. I got a friend who went from [GS] 11 to [GS] 12 and I know he didn’t complete the PME.” This observation led A5 to conclude; “I think I could realistically attain my career goals without participating in nonresident PME because other people have.” Likewise, Participant A4 was convinced, based on how employees are typically selected for promotion, that nonresident PME was not needed to reach the job positions to which they aspired.

Participant A6 adamantly stated, “As long as it is not written into a duty description that I need it I am not going to do it…I think I could accomplish...perform

well at an administrative position without having to do PMEs." A6 was also confident that his perception of nonresident PME was correct because, in his words, "I don't know of anyone who was passed over for a position because they had not completed PME."

For Participants A7 and A11, PME completion was less important than completing a master's degree for reaching their career goals. A11 disclosed that having the appropriate academic degrees was more important in their government occupation than completing nonresident PME. Moreover, even though A7 did not think that completing PME made a difference in getting a promotion, he did believe that nonresident PME completion helps employees when competing for quarterly or annual employee awards.

Participant A8 stated that nonresident PME completion "does not guarantee you will be promoted or placed in a greater leadership role," and admitted to seeing people being promoted "every day" without having completed PME. A8 explained further,

> I guess you know on paper, or politically it says that it is important, that this is a square I need to fill if I want to get to the next level, but I guess in reality that's not how it always works because I know for a fact you have leaders in different roles but have not completed those squares, but maybe for some they say it is an important square to fill, but will it get me where I want to be? Probably not.

Participant A11 expressed a similar sentiment: "I don't think other than having checked a block for me; I can't see where it [PME] added a benefit in promotion or career advancement."

In contrast to these negative perceptions regarding the role of nonresident PME in reaching personal career goals, Participants A1, A9, and A12 believed that PME completion played an important part when competing for promotions. A1 was confident that PME completion will be a factor in making GS-14 and acknowledged that hiring officials can use PME as a tiebreaker when choosing between two equally qualified candidates. Participant A9 stated, "PME is very important for the attainment of my professional and career goals. It opens doors for other opportunities. I know of an instance when the fact that I had completed PME factored into the hiring official's decision." It is important to note that A9 conceded, "There are folks out there today that are in high-level positions where they have not had PME, or they haven't had all of the PME, and they have still done well as far as being promoted." In generally speaking about the benefit of completing PME, A9 commented, "I think it says…about the individual that…you are going to be an Air Force asset because you are willing to go further beyond what is absolutely minimally required to do your job."

Finally, Participant A12 had this to say: "I see PME benefiting me when competing for promotions. It could tip me over the scale when competing against an equally qualified person." A12 stated, additionally, that PME completion is of particular importance when competing for GS-14 and GS-15 positions, which are at the top of the government's GS pay schedule. Furthermore, A9 recognized that employees without having completed PME "are promoted all the time."

## Evidence of Quality

Appropriate measures were taken to ensure that a balanced view of the data was presented (Lodico et al., 2010). Participants supplied their opinions regarding the validity of the questions and whether additional questions should have been included in the data collection. The participants confirmed the validity of the main interview questions and believed that the questions adequately addressed the central research question.

Interviews were digitally recorded with each participant's consent. The recorded data were transcribed by a professional transcription service, not in any way connected to the study, which safeguarded construction of the transcripts from bias. Each participant was provided a copy of their interview transcript to review for accuracy (Appendix E: Sample Interview Transcript). Five participants reviewed drafts of the preliminary data analysis and were asked whether the interpretation of the data encapsulated their perceptions of nonresident PME—a procedure recommended by Merriam (2009). Furthermore, the data analysis was informally discussed with a colleague outside of the study who expressed an interest in the research topic.

## Emergent Themes

### Theme 1: Awareness of Nonresident PME Courses

Participants described their familiarity with the content of nonresident PME courses. Eleven of the 12 participants claimed familiarity with the content and structure of nonresident PME. Familiarity with the content of professional development courses can influence employees' decisions to enroll. For example, Harris (2008) found that a

sample of Kansas school teachers was more likely to participate in professional development activities with which they were familiar. Another study by Dunphy and Wilson (2009) revealed that lack of employee awareness regarding the availability of training courses was a top ten reason for employees not engaging in the courses.

In this study, however, the degree of familiarity with the content and structure of nonresident PME courses was not identified by any of the participants as a factor that influenced their decisions to enroll or not to enroll. Moreover, all 12 participants knew that nonresident PME is available for Air Force civilians.

***Subtheme: Publicity***. Perceptions of the how well the Air Force publicized nonresident PME courses was a subtheme that was uncovered during the interviews. There was no consensus, however, among participants as some stated the Air Force did a good job**,** while others said the Air Force's publicity efforts were not adequate.

**Theme 2: Perceived Barriers to Nonresident PME Completion**

Previous studies described many perceived barriers to participation in professional development activities such as work-life balance, inadequate institutional resources, cost, distance, workloads, and so forth (Catalfamo, 2010; Ellis, 2010: Murray & Lawry, 2011; Ryan & Bhattacharyya, 2012); Schostak, 2010). In this study, the participants did not mention any perceived external barriers to nonresident PME participation. Furthermore, all 12 participants were confident that they possessed the academic and technological skills needed to participate in professional development courses via distance learning.

***Subtheme: Intrinsic motivation.*** The five participants that had not completed at least one nonresident PME admitted that a lack of motivation was the primary internal barrier to completing PME courses. Reasons for this lack of motivation included a general aversion to taking tests and writing papers, disinterest in the course content, and contentment with current pay grade.

**Theme 3: Organizational Support**

Previous studies revealed that employees' perceptions of organizational commitment to employee professional development influenced the rates at which they participated in professional development activities. For example, Kuvass and Dysvik (2009) cited research that indicated that employees might develop positive attitudes toward their employers when the employers were committed to employee development. Research conducted by Pajo, Coetzer, and Guenole (2010) among adult distance education students, as well as Lee and Bruvold's (2003) study among nurses in the United States and Singapore revealed that organizational support affected employees' participation in professional development opportunities.

While the participants' perceptions of organizational support ranged from "very poor" to "very good," none of the participants indicated an association between perceived organizational support and their decisions to enroll in nonresident PME courses. In other words, participants' perceptions of organizational support did not completely drive their decisions to enroll in nonresident PME. However, it is important to note that levels of organizational commitment to professional development activities are noticed by Air Force civilian employees.

***Subtheme: Supervisor and co-worker contact.*** As a subtheme, supervisor and co-worker support emerged as an important aspect of participants' perceptions regarding participation in nonresident PME. Newman, Thanacoody, and Hui (2011) discovered that support from supervisors and co-workers influenced participation in employee development among multinationals in the Chinese service sector. Similarly, a sample of staff in higher education institutions identified lack of encouragement from supervisors as a top ten barrier to participation in development courses (Dunphy & Wilson, 2009).

This study revealed that many of the participants had received little guidance or encouragement from supervisors and co-workers throughout their careers related to nonresident PME participation. Only two Participants, A7 and A12, recalled receiving encouragement from supervisors to enroll in nonresident PME. In fact, A12 was the only participant that had discussed their overall professional development plan with a supervisor.

**Theme 4: Perceived Value for Leadership Development**

Participants from previous voiced differing attitudes toward the value of professional development participation. For example, Gumus, Borkowski, Deckard, and Martel (2011) examined survey data from over hundred healthcare managers and found they highly valued participation in professional development activities. High school science teachers in another study said they valued professional development and found it to have a positive impact on classroom instruction (Shumack & Forde, 2011). On the other hand, public sector professionals in six Asian nations stated that professional development participation did not add value to their job performance (Mokhtar, 2010).

Likewise, Air Force civilians expressed mixed perceptions of the value of nonresident PME courses. Six of the 12 participants attributed little value to nonresident PME for their leadership development (five of the six had not completed at least one PME nonresident PME course). The other six participants attributed a high value to nonresident PME for their foundational leadership development and for helping them understand important Air Force issues.

***Subtheme: Perceptions of prior enlisted civilians.*** Each of the participants with prior enlisted military experience doubted the value of nonresident PME completion for their foundational leadership development. These participants believed their years of active duty military experience and completion of enlisted PME provided them the leadership skills needed to perform well as Air Force civilian leaders. Moreover, some of these prior enlisted participants believed that nonresident PME courses would likely rehash material learned in enlisted PME courses.

**Theme 5: Role of Nonresident PME for Attainment of Career Goals**

Extrinsic rewards (i.e., promotions, greater leadership responsibilities, and so forth) have served as important factors in motivating employees to engage in professional development opportunities (Sanford, Dainty, Belcher, & Frisbee, 2011). In this study, many of the participants perceived that nonresident PME completion would not result in receiving promotions. Therefore, many of the participants did not believe that nonresident PME was necessary for reaching their career goals.

***Subtheme: Hiring practices.*** For example, participants stated there is inconsistency among hiring officials regarding the importance attributed to nonresident

PME; therefore, PME completion may or may not be important when competing for promotions. Some participants observed that they often see fellow employees who have not completed nonresident PME receive promotions. One participant declared they did not know personally of any employee that had completed nonresident PME receive a promotion. Another participant remarked that he was not aware of any employee who was passed over for promotion because that employee lacked nonresident PME. Moreover, another participant stated there were civilians in high-level positions that have not completed PME at all or at least have not completed all the PME they needed. Therefore, participants often based their opinions of nonresident PME on the career success of fellow employees who either had or had not completed nonresident PME.

On the other hand, several participants believed that even though it does not guarantee an employee will be promoted, nonresident PME completion could be valuable for opening doors to greater opportunities. Many of the participants believed that hiring officials would be justified in using nonresident PME completion as a tiebreaker when considering equally qualified candidates for promotion. (It is important to know that only one participant knew they were passed over for a promotion due to not having completed PME, and one participant knew that having completed nonresident PME was an important factor in receiving a promotion.)

***Subtheme: Importance of academic education.*** Some of the participants believed that having a university degree commensurate with their pay grade and occupational series was more important than nonresident PME completion for attaining their professional and career goals. In addition, some of the participants stated that a

person's academic education level should be used as a tiebreaker when hiring officials need to differentiate between equally qualified job candidates.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Air Force senior leaders expect civilian employees to complete nonresident PME courses as an essential part of their foundational leadership development. However, in 2013, less than 10% of civilian employees had completed at least one PME course. Moreover, at the installation to which I am assigned, the completion rate in 2013 for civilians was less than 3%. In light of these low completion rates, this study sought to discover the attitudes and opinions toward nonresident PME held by Air Force civilian employees.

All of the participants in this study were well qualified and experienced civilian employees who competently contributed to the Air Force's mission to *fly*, *fight*, and *win* in air, space, and cyberspace. It is also true that these employees were deeply interested in enhancing their professional growth and leadership skills through participation in professional development activities. Nevertheless, while senior Air Force leaders trumpet the importance of nonresident PME for civilian employees, many of the participants in this study expressed reservations about the value of nonresident PME for their leadership development and career progression.

The data showed that the participants were well aware of the content and availability of nonresident PME courses; therefore, their decision-making regarding PME enrollment was not hampered by any lack of familiarity with course content and availability. It is important to note that even though the participants had adequate

awareness of nonresident PME courses, they still believed the Air Force needs to improve how it publicizes nonresident PME courses. For example, some of the participants mentioned that emails are sent only once a year, notifying civilian employees about nonresident PME opportunities. These comments suggest that the Air Force should review how information about nonresident PME is disseminated.

Unlike findings in previous studies in a variety of occupational areas, none of the participants identified any barriers to completing nonresident PME courses. All of the participants were confident in their ability to handle PME course requirements along with their workload, family situations, and so forth. The participants that had not completed any nonresident PME courses were certain they possess the academic ability and computer skills needed to complete the courses. Moreover, participants that had completed nonresident PME stated they did not encounter any significant external barriers while enrolled in the course.

It is important to consider this part of the data in the context of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) that undergirded the formation of the main interview questions. A central tenet of TPB is that perceived or actual volitional control influences a person's behavior. In other words, behavioral action requires the ability to perform the action (Ajzen, 1991; Chennamaneni, 2006). In this study, every participant believed they possessed the capacity to complete nonresident PME (i.e., volitional control); however, simply having control over any barriers was not enough, in and of itself, to prompt the participants to enroll in PME.

The five participants not having completed nonresident PME were not intrinsically motivated to complete PME, citing their disinclination for test-taking and paper writing, dislike of the PME course content, and contentment with their current pay grade. Although the nature of this study presented a barrier to making generalizations about the population, my 20 years of civil service experience lead me to believe that a larger randomized study would uncover a similar lack of intrinsic motivation among Air Force civilians to complete nonresident PME.

Since the Air Force stresses civilian participation in nonresident PME, it was important to ask the participants about how they perceived organizational support for course completion. Most of the participants had received little or no encouragement from supervisors or co-workers throughout their careers to enroll in PME courses. In fact, three participants had never been approached by a supervisor or colleague about enrolling in PME courses. A lack of encouragement from supervisors might have been due to several factors. It is possible that supervisors were not convinced of the value of nonresident PME. Alternatively, it could be that senior leaders had not encouraged supervisors to discuss the topic with their subordinates. On the other hand, it could also have been the case that supervisors assumed their employees had received the encouragement they needed from the annual emails sent from the Air Force Personnel Center. It was not the intent of this study to investigate supervisors' perceptions of nonresident PME, but studies by other researchers could provide valuable data on this topic.

It was not surprising that the five participants without nonresident PME attributed little value to PME for their foundational leadership development. I did not expect to find, however, that several participants believed that the enlisted PME they completed while on active duty had already provided them the knowledge and skills needed to perform as competent civilian leaders. The prior enlisted participants held this perception whether or not they had completed nonresident PME. Therefore, the data clearly showed that prior enlisted PME completion influenced participants' perceptions of nonresident officer PME. I believe these perceptions of nonresident PME by prior enlisted members are important and deserve further investigation.

In answer to Question 5, many of the participants mentioned that nonresident PME completion would not likely lead to a promotion. According to most of the participants, inconsistent hiring practices left employees uncertain about the value of nonresident PME for reaching their professional and career goals. Some participants complained that civilians often earned promotions without completing nonresident PME. In addition, some participants believed that possessing an advanced academic degree was more important for fulfilling their career goals than nonresident PME completion. Clearly, real world hiring practices greatly influenced participants' motivation to enroll in nonresident PME.

Section 3: The Project

## Introduction

I constructed a position paper that presents recommendations for addressing the low rates at which Air Force civilians complete nonresident PME courses. This position paper includes a summary of the research problem, a review of the analysis and findings, support from both literature and research, and recommendations based on findings and conclusions drawn from the interview data. The audience for this paper is senior leaders at the Air Force Personnel Center and the AETC Directorate of Manpower, Personnel, and Services. Furthermore, the local installation commander will be briefed on the results of this study.

This section describes the goals of the position paper and the rationale for selecting this project genre to address the problem. A review of current research literature used to inform the content of the project is included. An implementation plan outlining potential resources, barriers, a proposed timetable for implementation, and the roles of stakeholders are explained. A description of the project evaluation plan and implications for local and far-reaching social change are will be discussed. Further recommendations for improving civilian participation rates in nonresident PME, based on research and relevant literature, are included in Appendices A and B.

## Description and Goals

The primary goals of this paper are to inform local Air Force senior leaders about factors that influenced civilian employees' attitudes and opinions toward nonresident PME participation and to provide researched-based recommendations for improving

civilian nonresident PME completion rates. The commander of the installation to which I was assigned at the time of this study receives quarterly updates on the number of civilian employees that have completed nonresident PME courses. According to my colleague who provides the quarterly data, the commander wanted to know why nonresident PME completion rates for civilian employees are low and how can these completion rates be improved. This policy recommendation paper answers the commander's request for information to aid in understanding and addressing the issue. Additionally, the director of the Manpower, Personnel, and Services organization in which the study participants were assigned was informed of this study and has asked to review the final conclusions and recommendations.

Two versions of the policy recommendation paper were accomplished: (a) a detailed version in APA format, and (b) a condensed version formatted according to guidelines published in *The Tongue and Quill*, (United States Air Force, 2015). This decision to create two versions of the policy paper was informed by my many years of experience preparing documents for review by Air Force commanders. The condensed position paper is suitable for submission to busy commanders who need relevant information summarized in an easy-to-read document limited to no more than three pages (United States Air Force, 2015). However, I also anticipate submitting the extended paper to Air Force leaders desiring to examine the research project in greater detail.

## Rationale

According to *The Tongue and Quill* (United States Air Force, 2015), it is appropriate to accomplish a position paper "when you must evaluate a proposal, raise a

new idea for consideration, advocate a current situation or proposal, or 'take a stand'…" (p. 230). An article by the Xavier University Library (2014) mentioned that a position paper is useful for generating support on an issue by supplying the facts undergirding the rationale for the position being advocated. In keeping with the purpose of this study, as well as the data analysis, findings, and conclusions, these descriptions indicated that a position paper is an appropriate literary vehicle for presenting policy recommendations to Air Force leaders regarding civilian participation in nonresident PME.

The policy paper recommendations are grounded in research data that described participants' awareness of nonresident PME courses, perceived barriers to nonresident PME course participation, opinions of organizational support, as well as the perceived value of nonresident PME completion for leadership development and career progression. Furthermore, major evidence from related literature informed the policy recommendations.

## Review of the Literature

This literature review presents a survey of recent studies regarding the design and delivery of professional development programs across a variety of industries and occupations. Many of these studies offered policy proposals for enhancing professional development implementation and employee participation, which, along with findings from my investigation, formed the basis for the policy recommendations presented in Appendix A. In addition to defining professional development and its benefits to organizations, this review highlights three factors that enhance continuing development programs:

1. relevance to employee learning needs,
2. employee awareness of their availability and benefits, and
3. organizational support for mentoring relationships.

Chuang (2015) defined professional development "as a self-directed and an ongoing approach to enhance and maintain individual's knowledge, skills, and competencies, whether formally or informally" (p. 28). Cusick, Convey, Novak, and McIntyre (2009) also explained professional development as the means for maintaining professional competence and technical expertise. Professional development can include commonly thought of activities such as seminars/workshops, conferences, and on-the-job training. Also, employee development encompasses other forms that may not immediately come to mind such as non-job-related courses, performance feedback and assessments, career planning activities, and visits to outside organizations to observe how they function (Pierce & Maurer, 2009). In fact, everything employees do to improve their performance is considered continuing professional development (CPD) (Chuang, 2015).

Effective professional development opportunities can enhance an organization's work culture and increase employee satisfaction, leading to better functioning organizations that continuously improve (Pierce & Maurer, 2009; Plotner & Trach, 2010). Therefore, it is vital for employers to craft continuing development activities and programs that help employees overcome perceived barriers to participation (Chuang, 2015). Furthermore, to enhance participation in CPD, human resource managers, supervisors, senior leaders, and so forth, need familiarity with factors that motivate

workers to engage in formal or informal CPD. The following synopses of prior research describe several of these factors and their impact on CPD participation.

Several recent studies concluded that professional development needs to be relevant to participants' immediate work environments. For instance, Bernhardt (2015) utilized a mixed-methods approach to examine a teacher professional development program at a private K-12 school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. A majority of the 80 participants stated that professional development was essential for their growth. In addition, many of the participants emphasized that for professional development to be effective, it needed to be directly relevant to their classroom practices. One participant's statement was especially emblematic of this perspective: "If professional development will not directly help me in the classroom, then it is a waste" (Bernhardt, 2015, p. 11). In similar fashion, another teacher said, "My needs are related to real classroom situations. That is why, when professional development activities are conducted based on real life situations, we can talk about effective professional development activities" (Bayar, 2014, p. 323). Moreover, these participants desired professional development that would keep them up-to-date on the newest theories and practices in their field.

In recent years, online delivery of targeted professional development opportunities has grown in popularity (Brown & Green, 2003, as cited in Chitanana, 2012). One study investigated the implementation of an online course designed to foster interaction, dialogue, and mentoring to produce outcomes similar to those resulting from resident courses (Chitanana, 2012). This qualitative investigation focused on a cohort of

28 international science and technology educators representing the United States and 13 other countries. Even though this was an online course, participants expressed how much they enjoyed the collaborative learning experiences with people from diverse educational, cultural, and geographical backgrounds. In addition, the course featured contemporary topics that were relevant to each participant's national education goals and local social contexts; thereby, making the course material easier to understand (Chitanana, 2012). McLoughlin and Luca (2000, as cited in Chitanana, 2012) also stated that learning must be related to students' real-life situations.

As a result of their two-year mixed-methods study among 334 early childhood educators and review of other recent evidence, researchers Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan, and Hunt (2012) recommended targeted professional development to enhance employees' teamwork skills, resulting in improved student learning. The authors noted that effective professional development needed to focus on the specific technical skills childhood educators were expected to demonstrate daily (Jones et al., 2012). Pickett (1999, as cited in Jones et al., 2012) remarked that even though methods for delivering professional development may differ, the content must focus on the specific skills paraeducators need to perform well with children. To put it broadly, relevant professional development programs and activities should specifically target the occupational competencies all employees, not just paraeducators, must master to perform their jobs well (Altun & Cengiz, 2012; Kyndt, Govaerts, Claes, Marche, & Dochy, 2012).

Bullock et al. (2003) reached a similar conclusion while investigating a nonmandatory continuing development program sponsored by a UK professional

association for dental practitioners. Although the over 2000 dentists surveyed were free to choose the CPD activities in which to participate, they often selected activities that failed to impact their dental practices. In other words, many dentists were not choosing development activities that met their specific learning needs. Therefore, researchers suggested that dentists develop personal development plans that focused on meeting their learning needs for CPD to impact their professional practice. In this case, CPD was targeted to dentists with more than 15 years of general practice experience and those administering care in solo practices.

A professional psychological society recommended a comparable approach to meeting the specific learning needs of entry, midlevel, and senior consulting psychologists (Cooper, Monarch, Serviss, Gordick, & Leonard, 2007). This multi-layered system incorporated a logical mix of web-based courses, reading materials, conferences, workshops, and experiential education opportunities; each is an avenue for effective professional development. In reaction to this approach, one consulting psychologist commented, "Although my diligent reading and enthusiastic attendance at lectures focused on organizational theory certainly contributed to my understanding of consulting psychology, the mentors who embraced me gave me a priceless education" (Cooper et al., 2007, p. 9). Moreover, even the society's task force acknowledged that targeted continuing education, commensurate with an employee's experience level, is enhanced when solid mentoring relationships are supported by the organization (Cooper et al., 2007,).

Research has also shown that access to relevant training and development programs can have a positive impact on employee satisfaction (Shaheen, Ghayyur, & Yasmeen, 2014). For instance, a survey of 419 workers at a notable British retailer revealed that satisfaction increased among employees that learned new job-related skills (Allen & Moyer, 1990, as cited in Shaheen et al., 2014). As a matter of fact, Georgellis and Lange (as cited in Shaheen et al., 2014) in a 2007 study among UK nurses discovered that dissatisfaction with development opportunities had a more profound impact on job satisfaction than workload or pay. Therefore, it is incumbent upon organizations to provide development opportunities that meet employees' specific learning needs to enhance employee motivation.

Based on their in-depth interviews with a group of 16 Australian occupational therapists, Cusick et al. (2009) recommended that professional development content be aligned with organizational goals to make participation worth employees' time. In other words, employee development activities should tie together employees' learning objectives, supervisors' expectations, and all aspects of the organization's core functions (Cusick et al., 2009). Therefore, effective professional development programs should include input and feedback from staff at all levels of the organization.

In addition to delivering relevant, targeted continuing development programs, researchers have recommended increasing participation rates through improved employee awareness of the availability and benefits of development activities. For example, Hurtz and Williams (2009) investigated factors influencing participation rates among 427 employees from varying ethnic and occupational categories and concluded that enhanced

awareness of, and positive attitudes toward professional development programs are essential for increasing participation rates.

In a study of UK schools, Pedder and Opfer (2010) highlighted the need for leaders to inform staff of the range of available CPD opportunities and the rationale for participating in those opportunities. Pedder and Opfer (2010) observed that teachers and administrators needed to be educated on the capacity of CPD to enhance student learning outcomes and to improve schools as a way to increase CPD participation rates. In another study, researchers investigated motivating factors for a sample of 67 home-based child care providers in Oregon and discovered that a provider's beliefs about the benefits of professional development influenced their choice to participate in continuing education opportunities (Rusby, Jones, Crowley, Smolkowski, & Arthun, 2013). These studies demonstrated that greater employee knowledge of the content and benefits of professional development programs boosted participation rates, resulting in enhanced work performance.

In their examination of continuing professional development (CPD) among Australian accounts, de Lange, Jackling, and Basioudis (2012) discovered that most accounting professionals viewed CPD as a guide for maintaining technical competence. In light of this perception, the researchers believed it was wise for organizations to educate employees regarding the value of CPD participation for meeting employees' occupational learning needs. In another example, the Asia-Oceania Federation of Organizations for Medical Physics (AFOMP) advised its member countries to construct CPD systems that meet participants' development needs over their entire careers (Round

et al., 2012). It was emphasized that CPD should not be done merely to fulfill a training requirement, but that participants should know its purpose is to make them better medical physicists. Going further, the researchers recommended that CPD should encompass a broad range of activities such as seminars, workshops, tutorials, and mentoring.

In similar fashion, Badu, Owusu-Boateng, and Saah (2009) concluded that teachers should "be encouraged to participate in a wide range of informal and formal activities, which will help them in processes of review, renewal, enhancement of thinking and practice and, more especially, being committed both in mind and heart" (p. 56). Badu et al. (2009) studied a random sample of 200 elementary and secondary teachers in Ghana to determine how often they participated in a specific in-service CPD program. A majority of the respondents believed the in-service training to be a valuable aspect of CPD. To increase participation rates, the researchers suggested that in-service CPD be linked to promotion and a range of other incentives and that the government needed to increase CPD opportunities in order to give all teachers a fair chance of participation. Plus, the government ought to make teachers aware of the benefits of in-service training for their overall professional development. Finally, Badu et al. (2009) concluded that professional development ought to enhance teachers' moral and pedagogical thinking, as well as improve their culturally relevant management and leadership skills. It is evident the researchers hold favorable views of CPD for enhancing the whole person and not just as a means of improving teachers' skills in the classroom.

While these studies mentioned relevancy and awareness as factors that influenced participation in development activities, other studies emphasized the role of mentoring in

effective continuing professional development programs. For example, researchers Pool, Poell, Berings, and Cate (2015) confirmed that mentors can enhance employee learning by providing feedback as part of a supportive social network. Mentors should also allow employees the freedom to set their own schedules and to determine how the work should be done to encourage learning.

A study among 129 graduate student administrators (GSAs) in institutions with graduate English programs described the mentoring role directors should carry out as they develop their graduate students for careers in academia. Rowan (2009) proposed that directors conduct one-on-one discussions to negotiate expectations, goals, and limitations of the professional development program. However, Rowan (2009) also recommended that GSAs not rely on a single mentor but, instead, should establish relationships with multiple mentors. Rowan (2009) explained that each mentor can provide a different mentoring function that helps to meet a GSA's professional development needs.

In another study, hundreds of public health workers attending an annual industry conference suggested ways to increase professional development participation that focused on mentoring and improved communication regarding internships, fellowships, and job opportunities. According to Kroelinger, Kasehagen, Barradas, and Ali (2012), the respondents suggested that an on-going mentoring forum be established as an ideal way to enhance professional development among public health workers. In keeping with this suggestion from those surveyed, the researchers recommended that conference planners promote supportive relationships between mid- and senior-level workers.

Kroelinger et al. (2012) concluded that these mentoring relationships have the capacity to enhance the workers' leadership skills and occupational competencies.

A working group of U.K. physicians also emphasized the importance of supportive relationships among colleagues for effective professional development (Clinical Medicine [CLIN MED], 2012). According to the article, these supportive relationships "strengthen multi-professional teams and promote collaboration between team members," and "support the development of effective communication skills through interactive approaches, such as simulation, observation and practice with feedback" (CLIN MED, 2012, p. 109). It is important to note these mentoring relationships were to be a part of the physicians daily clinical practice. The working group also recommended that physicians participate in a variety of educational activities to include conferences and workshops. Clearly, this physicians group valued an approach to effective professional development that promoted mentoring relationships, on-the-job learning opportunities, and participation in a variety of off duty learning activities.

Formal mentoring was also a key component of the faculty development program at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy (MCP) (Guglielmo et al., 2011). Many of the faculty members at MCP had participated in informal development programs, but not formal programs. MCP devised a long-term plan that included a mentorship committee, seminars/workshops, and regularly scheduled meetings between mentors and mentees. In addition, Guglielmo et al. (2011) referenced other research arguing that as adult learners, faculty members in schools of pharmacy would likely be more motivated to participate in professional development programs when they have the opportunity to direct the content.

This research also concluded that professional development programs must provide participants the opportunity to apply concepts and skills directly to their immediate contexts.

Other research touted mentoring relationships as a critical aspect of effective professional development. These relationships often facilitate learning communities in which employees can learn collaboratively as they bring their talents to the workplace. Furthermore, these supportive learning communities possess the capacity to foster greater employee motivation, job satisfaction, and retention (LaPointe-Terosky & Heasley, 2015).

In a three-year study of 54 licensed family child care providers in Washington state, Lanigan (2011) discovered that supportive relationships were an important aspect of the providers' professional development. The study's participants preferred a cohort model of professional development that fostered trusting, nonjudgmental relationships among colleagues. This positive environment motivated the child care providers to continue attending the professional development program.

Similar findings emerged from a study by University of Massachusetts-Boston researchers that examined the impact of collective involvement on professional development participation patterns among early childhood educators (ECEs; (Douglass, Carter, & Smith, 2015). The researchers reviewed statewide professional development attendance records for over 1600 ECE's and discovered that instances of collective participation were uncommon. In other words, an educator typically attended professional development activities unaccompanied by educators from the same ECE

program. In response to these findings, Douglass et al. (2015) stressed that collaborative professional development involving teaching teams, supervisors, and co-workers were needed. The researchers went on to recommend that state and national professional development systems be structured in ways to encourage collective participation, leading to the formation of caring, learning communities that enhance the growth of ECE teachers and administrators.

Research also indicated the importance of supervisors spending quality time with their staff members as a crucial aspect of supportive, developmental relationships. For example, participants in a study among vocational rehabilitation providers stressed that individual relationships between supervisors and employee formed the core of an effective professional development program (Plotner & Trach, 2010). Research data indicated that positive relationships between supervisors and staff have the capacity to reduce employee turnover, increase promotion and retention rates, and improve job satisfaction (Bordieri et al., 1988; Mann-Layne, Hohenshil, & Singh, 2004, as cited in Plotner & Trach, 2010).

Prior research suggested that positive supervisor-subordinate relationships can positively influence employees' perceptions of the organization, (Levinson, 1965, as cited in Pierce & Maurer, 2009). According to Pierce and Maurer (2009), people often feel obligated to repay a benefit received from someone else. For this discussion, the implication is that when employers foster supportive, developmental relationships, employees are likely to reciprocate by engaging in professional development opportunities sponsored by their organizations.

It is important to note that in a similar manner to mentoring relationships between supervisors and subordinates, peer coaching can help to sustain employees in CPD (Meng, Tajaroensuk, & Seepho, 2013). In a study of 12 Chinese teachers of English as a foreign language, researchers discovered the teachers preferred working as a team over working individually in their in-service professional development. For example, one participant commented

> When we use this kind of multilayered peer coaching practice...other teachers in your group can bring you new ideas, new teaching methods, so it certainly can enlarge our views, can expand our horizons and it is very helpful for our professional development. (Meng et al., 2013, p. 1318)

In addition to sparking new ideas and methods, peer coaching motivated teachers to continue in their professional development. One teacher observed that peer coaching helped to sustain their enthusiasm for the in-service professional development program when challenges were encountered. "Sometimes," the teacher remarked, "the problems are so unexpected, when I teach by myself, I can find nobody to discuss with, sometimes I fail to solve it and sometimes I solve it long after" (Meng et al., 2013, p. 1318).

## Implementation

The policy recommendation paper will be presented to the installation commander who has requested suggestions regarding ways to increase nonresident PME course participation. If requested, the commander will be briefed in his office on the study's background, findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The recommendations will also be briefed to the director of the Manpower, Personnel, and Services organization to

which I was assigned at the time of the study. In their roles as senior leaders, both are well positioned to forward the project to other Air Force leaders for broader consideration.

**Potential Resources and Existing Supports**

The quarterly briefing provided to the installation commander by a variety of base agencies provides a convenient venue in which to present the policy recommendations regarding civilian participation in nonresident PME, especially because the commander has requested suggestions on how to improve nonresident PME completions during the quarterly briefing. The installation's civilian training manager has consented to schedule my policy recommendations presentation during the quarterly commander's briefing. Furthermore, I am confident that the commander's support staff will work with me to schedule an in-person meeting if needed.

**Potential Barriers**

Because local Air Force leaders are interested in improving civilian employee participation in nonresident PME, I do not anticipate hindrances to presenting the policy recommendations to the installation commander or other senior leaders. Moreover, during my almost 22 years of Air Force civilian experience, I have briefed installation-level leaders, both formally and informally, on a variety of topics. Therefore, I am well acquainted with how best to communicate the results of this study to the appropriate leaders.

It is possible that because the findings, conclusions, and recommendations in the policy paper are based on interview data from a sample of 12 civilian employees, the

installation commander and other senior leaders may believe that research on a wider scale should be accomplished before decisions are made relevant to the recommendations in the policy paper. In that case, this study could serve well as a preliminary survey leading to larger scale Air Force-sponsored studies.

**Proposal for Implementation and Timetable**

The installation commander is briefed quarterly on the number of civilian employees that have completed a nonresident PME course. I propose to present my research findings and policy recommendation paper at the earliest quarterly commander's briefing. A copy of the slide presentation will be provided to the commander in accordance with standard Air Force procedures. In addition, I will schedule an office meeting at the earliest convenience with the director of the local Manpower, Personnel, and Services agency to which the participants in the study were assigned. I anticipate presenting my findings and policy recommendations within 3-4 months after receiving final university approval of my project. After the policy paper presentation, I will schedule follow-up meetings with the installation commander and other local senior leaders to discuss the feasibility of implementing the recommendations locally and to garner their inputs on what should be my next steps.

**Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Others**

As the researcher, I am responsible for contacting the commander's administrative staff to schedule the presentation of the of the policy recommendation paper. The manager of the installation's Civilian Training Program, who is responsible for providing statistics on civilian nonresident PME participation, has agreed to request

my presentation be included on the next available commander's quarterly meeting agenda. If the commander prefers an in-office meeting, I will contact the commander's support staff to schedule the meeting.

Moreover, it is my responsibility to present the research findings and policy recommendations in accordance with Air Force standards. Therefore, all documents used in the policy paper presentation will conform to standards outlined by Air Education and Training Command (AETC) and *The Tongue and Quill* (United States Air Force, 2015).

## Project Evaluation Plan

Program evaluation is accomplished to assess the value of a program and to make programmatic decisions in keeping with the results of that assessment (Healy, 2000; McNeil 2011; Rallis & Bolland, 2004). For this program evaluation, an outcomes-based approach (summative) will be used to assess the results of the policy recommendations in the Appendix A policy paper. According to McNeill (2011), "Outcomes evaluations focus on assessing program results, based on participant learning and the impact of this learning for stakeholders such as students, funding agencies, and the greater community" (p. 24). Furthermore, Shakman and Rodriguez (2015) commented that a summative evaluation typically supplies data for people directly impacted by the program. Therefore, I believe this approach is best suited for determining if the recommended programs (employee education, focus groups, and mentoring relationships) have benefited civilian employees (outcomes) and, if so, to what extent have those benefits impacted nonresident PME completion rates.

The evaluation will utilize pre and post surveys of employees assigned to the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC; the organization to which I was assigned at the time of this study) who participate in the recommended nonresident PME education programs, focus groups, and mentoring relationships implemented by division directors in the organization. These surveys will reveal what has changed in the lives of the employees as a result of participating in these programs. Initially, a random sample of employees will complete a written entrance survey comprised of the questions used in this research project. This Likert scale survey will assess employees' attitudes toward nonresident PME at the start of the program. These data will be analyzed and securely maintained so that comparisons can be made to data collected from exit surveys of the same employees to determine if the policy recommendations have achieved their intended results.

According to Brown and Podolske (as cited in Healy, 2000), program evaluation reports should be targeted toward decision makers. In this case, results of this summative evaluation will provide evidence to help AFPC leaders (the primary stakeholders) decide if the implemented programs are achieving their intended outcomes and whether the programs should be continued as is, revised, or terminated.

This evaluation plan is undergirded by the assumption that employees must change their attitudes before they change their behavior, a notion suggested by Healy (2000). In other words, I believe the policy recommendations will improve employees' perceptions of nonresident PME, resulting in improved course completion rates. Moreover, aside from impacting employees' attitudes toward nonresident PME, the recommended programs have the potential to bring about other outcomes such as

enhanced manager-subordinate relationships and improved professional development planning by employees.

Healy (2000) noted that evaluating a program that is intended to change attitudes presents many challenges. Among these challenges, Healy (2000) posited that program participants "may change their behavior without changing their attitudes for the purpose of conforming to conduct codes governing intolerant or biased behavior" (p. 61). That is to say; it is possible that some employees may elect to enroll in nonresident PME courses without a concomitant change in their attitudes toward nonresident PME. However, I believe that a decision to enroll by an employee who was previously averse to enrolling in nonresident PME constitutes an attitude change (outcome) even if the employee continues to dismiss the benefits of nonresident PME courses.

## Implications Including Social Change

Senior Air Force leaders have emphasized the important roles civilian employees play in the Air Force's ability to meet National Security and military objectives. Civilian leadership development programs ensure that employees acquire and maintain the institutional and occupational competencies needed to perform at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. In addition to professional development gained through work experience and training, nonresident PME courses are essential for enhancing employee performance at all levels of the organization.

Nonresident PME completion rates remain low despite the expectation by senior leaders for civilians to complete nonresident PME courses. Thus far, the Air Force has not studied this phenomenon. Therefore, this policy recommendation paper

recommendation has the potential to accomplish at least three things: (a) provide local Air Force leaders insight into how civilian employees perceive the value of nonresident PME for their foundational leadership development, (b) help local Air Force leaders devise and implement resources that can improve civilian nonresident PME completion rates, and (c) serve as a pilot for larger Air Force sanctioned investigations into civilian participation in nonresident PME courses.

# Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

## Introduction

This research project was designed to examine perceptions of nonresident Professional Military Education (PME) held by Air Force civilian employees assigned to an installation in the Southwestern United States. Findings from interviews with 12 participants and relevant literature were used to develop a policy paper outlining recommendations for improving civilian nonresident PME completion rates. This section describes the project's strengths and limitations, suggestions for remediating those limitations, impact on social change, and directions for future research. Also presented in this section are my reflections on scholarship, project development and evaluation, leadership and change, and my roles as scholar, practitioner, and project developer.

## Project Strengths and Limitations

While the prior research studies cited did not specifically address factors impacting Air Force civilians' participation in nonresident PME, those studies concluded that by targeting employees' specific learning needs, educating staff about the benefits of professional development involvement, and fostering mentoring relationships, organizations are likely to improve professional development participation rates. Therefore, the policy paper recommendations for improving civilian nonresident PME participation rates align with research-based techniques used across a variety of industries and occupations.

Implementing these policy recommendations will not require funding of new human or technology resources because of a large body of existing resources. For

example, Air University could utilize existing computer networks and email systems to disseminate materials that educate employees about the benefits of nonresident PME participation for their foundational leadership development. Commanders and other leaders also have the discretion to conduct focus groups during the duty day at employees' usual work locations. Local leaders can also highly encourage supervisors and subordinates to both seek out mentors and become mentors through the Air Force's MyVector program (Hendrix, 2015). This online platform offers a matching tool for employees searching for a mentor and a robust array of resources that support mentoring relationships at all levels of the organization.

Notwithstanding these strengths, some limitations of the project should be noted. The policy recommendations do not present quick fix solutions for improving nonresident PME completion rates. It is difficult to predict the time it will take for the recommendations to impact PME completion rates once implemented. Furthermore, the project does not supply explicit instructions on how best to implement the recommendations. This project gives local commanders and managers leeway to assess available resources and to devise implementation strategies suitable for their organizations.

## Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations

While it may take an extended period to ascertain the project's impact on nonresident PME completion rates, leaders can begin early on gathering data to determine how the recommendations affect employees' attitudes and opinion toward nonresident PME participation. For example, pre and post surveys would produce data

for comparing employees' perceptions prior to and during their exposure to the project's recommendations implemented within their organizations.

Even though the project does not provide instructions for implementing the recommendations, commanders and managers who are the first to implement the recommendations would be encouraged to share best practices with other leaders across the installation. This collaboration could include sharing methods and employee survey data as well as human and technology resources between organizations.

## Scholarship

In an address to the annual meeting of the American Accounting Association, Boyer (1992) posited a four-part answer to the question, "What does it mean to be a scholar?" (p. 88). Boyer called these four interrelated parts of scholarship *discovery*, *integration*, *application*, and *teaching*. This definition has helped me reflect on my efforts to demonstrate scholarship through research.

Boyer (1992) stated that "research is at the very heart of academic life," describing this as the "scholarship of discovery" (p. 89). This pursuit of truth through scholarly research creates new knowledge that fosters a greater understanding of the world around us. Through my research, I uncovered perceptions of nonresident PME held by a select group of Air Force civilians. Knowledge gained from this study has the potential to help Air Force senior leaders understand why nonresident PME completion rates remain low. Furthermore, this study prompted me to think deeply about the value of nonresident PME for enhancing my professional development and attaining the leadership roles to which I aspire.

Boyer (1992) described a "scholarship of integration" in which "creative people…go beyond the isolated facts, who make connections across the disciplines, who help shape a more coherent view of knowledge and a more integrated, more authentic view of life" (p. 89). Like Boyer, I believe an integrative approach to scholarship can help researchers pull the proverbial pieces of the puzzle together to construct a fuller understanding of a particular phenomenon. For my doctoral study, disciplines such as industrial and organizational psychology, human resource management, and economics, when taken together, can help to describe civilians' perspectives of nonresident PME within intellectual, social, and ethical boundaries. A multi-disciplined analysis of the research findings was outside the scope of this project; however, I think this approach would allow future investigators to expand upon my research.

A key tenet of Boyer' (1992) perspective is that theory and research must relate to everyday life. Boyer (1992) called this the "scholarship of application" (p. 90). In other words, scholarly inquiry should be connected to practice. It was important to conduct research that not only provided insight into civilian employees' perceptions of nonresident PME participation but also to apply those insights in formulating recommended courses of action for enhancing civilian participation rates.

Boyer (1992) also emphasized that scholarship can inspire future scholars in the classroom, which he calls the "scholarship of teaching" (p. 90). Boyer commented that three or four outstanding teachers had greatly impacted his life. While I am not a classroom teacher, I believe that my scholarship can inspire other Air Force civilian

employees to undertake scholarly research that applies new knowledge and understanding to solving real world problems.

## Project Development and Evaluation

During this doctoral study, I learned that project development and evaluation begins with answering the questions of whom, what, how, and why. In other words, the researcher's first steps are to determine the purpose of the project (why), the target audience (who), the format in which the content will be presented (how), and the project's content (what).

The intent of this project is to inform local Air Force leaders about civilian employees' perceptions of nonresident PME and to present a policy paper outlining the problem that was investigated, a description of the data collection and analysis, findings from research and literature, and research-based recommendations for enhancing PME completion rates. All of these policy paper elements address the important why, who, how, and what questions that must be answered as a prelude to project development.

Of course, there should be a feasible means for evaluating the extent to which the project accurately defines the problem, analyzes the data, draws proper conclusions from the findings and literature, and makes appropriate recommendations. For this study, I enlisted the help of three participants along with the installation's civilian training manager to review the project and offer suggestions for improvement. Based on those suggestions, I clarified some of the project's key points and improved the format to ensure its alignment with Air Force briefing standards.

## Leadership and Change

The Air Force is committed to providing civilian employees a customizable mix of education, training, and work experiences to support their professional and leadership development. This leadership development occurs at all levels of the organization to develop civilian employees who possess tactical expertise, operational competence, and strategic vision (Hughes, 2009). Moreover, effective civilian leaders must demonstrate essential occupational and institutional competencies that are required to lead and manage their organizations (United States Air Force, 2003).

Throughout my 30 years of combined civilian and military Air Force experience, I have attended numerous workshops and seminars related to leadership development. However, this study prompted me to think about leadership development in three ways that I had not previously: (a) mentoring (e.g., supportive relationships), (b) lifelong learning, and (c) scholarship.

First, organizational support for employees' leadership development should foster an environment in which mentoring relationships are encouraged and sustained. Several researchers concluded that mentoring relationships can enhance employees' leadership skills and job performance (Guglielmo et al., 2011; LaPointe-Terosky & Heasley, 2015; Pool, Poell, Berings, & Cate, 2015; Rowan, 2009). Furthermore, I believe that supportive relationships in the workplace provide visible evidence of an organization's commitment to the emotional, physical, and social needs of its employees, which has the potential to boost employees' morale, sense of loyalty, and job satisfaction.

Second, leadership development occurs through a process of lifelong learning. Several participants in this study with prior military experience were convinced they had no need to participate in nonresident PME because they already possessed excellent leadership skills. I think that leadership skills require continual sharpening through education, training, and experience. In fact, nonresident PME is a fundamental component of the Air Force's commitment to providing lifelong learning opportunities for employees. In addition to PME courses, there are many other online continuing development courses offered at no cost. These short courses can help employees keep their leadership skills current in a rapidly evolving work environment. I completed several of these mini-courses and found them to be beneficial for my leadership development.

Third, I formerly perceived scholarly research as useful primarily for the academy and, therefore, to hold little practical value for the workplace. However, accomplishing this doctoral study has improved my communication, organizational, and critical thinking skills; thereby, enhancing my leadership development. To put it another way, scholarship through research has taught me to develop and apply evidence-based solutions to problems that I encounter in the workplace, resulting in better decision-making as an Air Force civilian leader.

## Analysis of Self as Scholar

Prior to this project study, I did not fully understand what it meant to be a scholar. In an address at the Lewis University Celebration of Scholarship, Isaacs (2012) stated that scholarship means being curious with a desire to dive deeply into the subject at

hand for no other reason than for the sake of knowledge itself. Isaacs further commented that "to be a scholar means that we have both the training and the moral determination to make a sustained, intellectual effort…to think deeply about something greater than ourselves" (p. 243). When reflecting on myself as a scholar, I find much to relate to in Isaacs' definition.

This doctoral study allowed me to accomplish sustained, in-depth study of a topic in which I had been curious for several years. The project prompted me to define the problem, to ask questions, to analyze the answers, and to make appropriate recommendations, while at the same time challenging my own biases and assumptions. Furthermore, this inquiry into civilians' perceptions of nonresident PME was not accomplished simply for my own benefit. My ultimate goal was to formulate research-based recommendations to help the Air Force increase civilian nonresident PME completion rates.

## Analysis of Self as Practitioner

I plan to apply my research to increasing civilian participation in nonresident PME courses. However, my work as a practitioner goes beyond addressing civilian nonresident PME completion rates. As the Voluntary Education chief for Air Education and Training Command (AETC), I apply the academic and research skills I have developed to overseeing Education Services Centers on 12 AETC installations. This work involves advising senior leaders who direct the Air Force's Voluntary Education program, as well as assisting Education Center staffs through policy interpretation, professional development, data collection and analysis, and funding of daily operations.

These Education Centers provide a myriad of services to include academic advising for Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) students, college-level exam administration, PME testing, on-base degree programs offered by civilian institutions, and military tuition assistance counseling. As a scholar-practitioner, it is my responsibility, according to Walden, "to create innovative solutions and strategies that can be used immediately to inform and elevate practice" (Walden University, 2015). I am fortunate to carry out this elevated practice in the field of military education counseling and program management.

To enhance my support of AETC Education Centers, I consult recent literature on topics such as distance/online learning, academic testing, education/career counseling, college accreditation, and so forth. This information prompts me to think critically about the Air Force's Voluntary Education program, resulting in recommended approaches military education counselors can use to assist Airmen pursuing their college degrees.

## Analysis of Self as Project Developer

Besides the requisite academic skills, I have learned that doctoral project development requires three elements: (a) sustained focus, (b) intellectual flexibility, and (c) patience. Before this study, I had never participated in a research project that lasted longer than a semester. My involvement in this study has spanned approximately three years. During these three years, I moved my family to another state in connection with a new job, watched my daughter enter college, and helped my wife deal with the stress of a new career in teacher professional development. Throughout these and other life events, it has been a struggle to maintain interest in my doctoral project. Personal interest in my

topic has ebbed and flowed, resulting in procrastination and even a leave of absence lasting several months. In the midst of these challenges, however, I re-energized my interest by conversing about my research with co-workers and friends. These conversations helped to renew my focus and pushed me toward the goal: successful completion of the doctoral study.

A second essential element of project development is intellectual flexibility. According to Anderson (2003), intellectual flexibility "involves the ability to see the elements of truth in all sides of a controversy, to analyze arguments, and to construct coherent ways of evaluating those arguments" (p. 2). In other words, I believe a project developer must approach the research problem with an open mind and be willing to forego assumptions and biases in an authentic pursuit of truth. On several occasions, several of the participants expressed perceptions of nonresident PME that conflicted with my own. However, it was essential for me to analyze the data objectively in order to accurately describe the findings and to draw appropriate conclusions. Moreover, this intellectual flexibility did not happen accidently. It resulted from an intentional effort to follow the data to wherever it led me despite my often-differing attitudes and opinions about nonresident PME.

Finally, I learned that project development requires a great deal of patience, especially when completion of the project requires vital assistance from outside agencies. Researchers Comer and Sekerka (2014) noted that "a person who behaves with patience demonstrates an ability to cope well with trying or otherwise unpleasant circumstances, including those created by others, for a protracted period" (p. 7). During the project, I

learned just that: how to deal with trying circumstances that were mostly out of my control.

Prior to receiving Walden IRB approval, I spent almost three months consulting with several agencies to ensure my research project conformed to Air Force and DoD ethics guidelines. Even though the IRB approval process was quite frustrating, I was obligated to allow the process to run its course. Patience, along with focus and intellectual flexibility, were the keys to successful completion of the doctoral study project.

## The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change

This project has the potential to bring about social change for Air Force civilians in at least two important ways. First, discussions of the project with local installation commanders can help renew their commitment to meeting the overall professional development needs of civilian employees in a manner that aligns with the expectations of senior Air Force leaders. Findings from the project indicated that participants' commanders and supervisors were not doing an adequate job of discussing their employees' professional development needs.

Second, the project's findings can help leaders, locally and Air Force wide, understand the factors that influence civilian participation in nonresident PME courses. The project's recommendations for improving civilian completion rates are intended to guide the Air Force in developing tools and resources that directly address the study's findings. These resources would be related to educating civilians on the benefits of nonresident PME participation, increasing efforts to discover civilian employees' specific

learning needs, and encouraging supervisors and subordinates to establish and maintain mentoring relationships as an essential aspect of civilian employees' overall leadership development.

## Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Senior Air Force commanders recognize that leadership development of civilians is essential for ensuring the Air Force's capacity to meet U.S. national security and international policy goals and objectives (United States Air Force 2003; Garamone, 2012; Rude, 2012). The Air Force provides a variety of programs that meet civilian employees' professional development needs at all stages of their careers. One of these many programs, nonresident PME, has been identified by senior leaders as a vital part of building civilians' occupational and institutional competencies (Hughes, 2009). Notwithstanding this emphasis on nonresident PME completion, civilian completion rates for nonresident PME have remained relatively low. Furthermore, this phenomenon has not been formally studied by the Air Force. Therefore, I believed it was imperative to investigate civilian employees' perceptions of nonresident PME and to offer research-based recommendations for enhancing civilian completion rates.

It is important to mention that Air Force civilians share much in common with employees across a wide variety of industries and occupations when it comes to their professional development needs. The project's findings and other research studies indicated that employees strongly desired professional development activities that addressed their specific learning needs. Organizations should conduct education and training programs that keep employees up-to-date on the latest theories and practices in

order to improve their decision-making and problem-solving skills. Furthermore, it is critical for organizations to understand the role supportive relationships play in motivating employees to seize continuing education opportunities sponsored by their organizations and professions.

Finally, I believe the Air Force should build upon this project with research into factors that impact civilian professional development. For example, several participants who had served on active-duty were confident that enlisted PME courses had supplied them with the training to perform well as civilian leaders and, therefore, had no need to participate in officer level nonresident PME. I suggest the Air Force conduct a wider study among prior enlisted civilians regarding their perceived professional development needs.

Moreover, I discovered that supervisors had done little to enter into mentoring relationships with the project's participants. This discovery could indicate that Air Force-wide, leaders are not encouraging supervisors to establish mentoring relationships even though relevant literature has revealed the importance of these relationships for employees' professional development. Therefore, I suggest the Air Force conduct research to determine if a widespread problem exists.

## Conclusion

This project deepened my thinking about scholarship through research as well as the role of a scholar-practitioner. Scholarship requires sustained intellectual effort to discover new knowledge about something greater than ourselves. Additionally, scholarship can play a critical role in leadership development through improved

communication, organizational, and critical thinking skills. It should be noted that while research rests at the center of academic life, the knowledge gained should relate to everyday life and be used to solve problems and make decisions in the real world. Furthermore, I learned that project development begins with a clearly defined purpose, develops content relevant to the target audience, and requires sustained focus, open-mindedness, and patience. Finally, this project has the potential to impact social change through increased nonresident PME civilian completion rates, leading to enhanced employee motivation, improved alignment of employee professional development with organizational goals and objectives, and enriched collaborative relationships among supervisors and subordinates across the enterprise.

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Appendix A: Position Paper

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss factors that influenced civilian employees' attitudes and opinions toward nonresident Professional Military Education (PME) and to provide researched-based recommendations for improving civilian nonresident PME completion rates. In addition to the recommendations, the paper presents background information on the existing policy/problem, a summary of findings from relevant literature, and an explanation of the findings related to interview data collected from a sample of 12 Air Force civilian employees.

## Background

The United States Air Force faces ever-evolving challenges related to readiness and training, the implementation of national and international policy objectives, the replacement of aging weapons systems, budget cuts, global terrorism, and the list goes on (Garamone, 2012). To meet these challenges successfully, the former Secretary of the Air Force, Michael Donley, and the former Air Force Chief of Staff, General Norton Schwartz, recognized the increasing reliance on Air Force civilians and that the approximately 143,000 civilians are vital to the Air Force's mission of *fly*, *fight*, and *win* in air, space, and cyberspace (Hughes, 2009). In his remarks regarding the fiscal challenges that will lead to a smaller Air Force, General Schwartz said, "It is obvious that everybody in the Air Force is needed…not only pilots but also all members of the service" (Garamone, 2012, para. 6).

To properly organize, train, and equip civilians, Air Force professional development programs and activities must be structured in a way that supports civilians at all stages of education, training, and experience. This customizable approach to civilian development focuses on producing civilians who perform well at their jobs and who exhibit high levels of leadership skills critical for supporting the Air Force's warfighting mission (United States Air Force, 2003). These guiding principles form a framework that is built around two required competencies: occupational competencies and institutional competencies. Occupational competencies describe the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform in a particular occupation or function; whereas, institutional competencies span functional communities and include the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to lead and manage the institution (United States Air Force, 2003).

Therefore, the Air Force Management and Development Council devised a civilian institutional leadership development continuum that established the minimum expected level of professional development for all Air Force civilians. This roadmap addressed three levels of employee development: tactical, operational, and strategic (Hughes, 2009). Each of the three professional development levels featured a recommended combination of education, experience, and Professional Military Education (PME) to help Air Force civilians master their primary duties and to develop their leadership skills. For example, the tactical level of development includes education opportunities, such as vocational schools, certification programs, and academic degree programs along with Squadron Officer School (SOS) as the proper PME component. At

the operational level, the same kinds of education opportunities are included along with the appropriate PME such as Air Command and Staff College (ACSC). The third level, Strategic, would include continuing education courses combined with Air War College (AWC) or its equivalent.

The Air Force's Civilian Continuum of Learning (n.d.) spells out the foundational and targeted institutional development programs available throughout civilian employees' careers. Civilians in pay grades GS 1-8, or equivalent, pursue education, training, and experience to develop their tactical expertise. Operational competence is the development focus for GS 9-13 or equivalent civilians. Moreover, civilians in grades GS 14-15, or equivalent, hone their institutional competencies for performance at the strategic level.

Depending on their desire for increased leadership responsibilities, civilians can choose the education, training, experience, and PME opportunities appropriate for their grade levels and career goals. To maximize participation in these development opportunities, the Air Force provides civilians many programs and resources to help them identify and acquire the appropriate institutional competencies. For example, Career Field Functional Managers advise civilians on the recommended experiences, education, and training needed to enhance their occupational qualifications and leadership skills. Reimbursement for expenses incurred when obtaining licenses and certifications required by state and federal authorities, as well as tuition assistance for continuing education and self-development courses are available. High performing civilians can apply for selective in-residence PME opportunities, which they attend alongside their military counterparts

at Air University, Maxwell AFB, Alabama. Nonresident PME programs are completed through distance learning and are available on a nonselective basis to civilians possessing a bachelor's degree and the required pay grade. Civilian Acculturation and Leadership Training also supplies select civilians with leadership, communication, and warfighting skills.

## Definition of the Problem

In their June 2009 letter regarding the Civilian Force Development Continuum, Secretary Donley and General Schwartz put forward the expectation for Air Force civilians to complete nonresident Professional Military Education (PME) as part of an employee's foundational leadership development. According to Air Force senior leaders, nonresident PME completion is a key ingredient for closing the gaps in civilian development along with New Employee Orientation Training, self-initiated personal and professional development, and Civilian Acculturation and Leadership Training to develop leadership, communication, and warfighting skills. Furthermore, Air Force leaders understand that nonresident PME is crucial for building occupational and institutional competencies at the Tactical, Operational, and Strategic development levels (Hughes, 2009).

However, Air Force personnel demographics for 2013 showed that approximately 9.2% of 143,242 permanent, full-time civilians had completed at least one PME course – Squadron Officer School (SOS): 3.6%, Air Command and Staff College (ACSC): 3.5%, and Air War College (AWC): 2% (Air Force Personnel Center, 2013). It is important to note that 29% of Air Force white-collar civilians have at least a bachelor's degree, which

is required to enroll in nonresident PME. However, the demographics do not indicate the number of white-collar employees by pay grade that possessed at least a bachelor's degree (Air Force Personnel Center, 2013). I believe these statistics reflect modest PME completion rates for civilians across the Air Force.

Moreover, PME completion rates for civilians at individual installations are sometimes substantially lower than the Air Force-wide completion rates. For example, at Columbus AFB from 2006-2012, 1.2% of 516 civilians assigned had enrolled in nonresident PME. During those years, one civilian completed nonresident ACSC and two civilians completed nonresident SOS. In another case, the nonresident PME civilian completion rate at JBSA-Randolph is approximately 2.6%. From another perspective, this statistic is roughly 71% below the overall Air Force completion rate of 9.2%.

It is apparent these modest completion rates do not live up to the expectation of senior Air Force leaders that civilian employees complete nonresident PME as a key component of foundational leadership development. As a way to investigate these low completion rates, I examined perceptions of nonresident PME held by a sample of civilians assigned to the AETC Directorate of Manpower, Personnel, and Services.

## Interview Questions

The intent of this study was to investigate the attitudes and opinions of Air Force civilians regarding participation in nonresident Professional Military Education (PME) courses. Discovering civilian employees' confidence in their ability to complete nonresident PME courses, as well as their views of the organization's support for nonresident PME participation, the availability and content of these courses, and the

importance of these courses for their career progression was the principal focus of this study. Therefore, the central question and subquestions for this research were as follows:

*Central Question:*

What are AF civilian employees' perceptions of nonresident Professional Military Education (PME) courses?

*Subquestions:*

1. How do civilian employees perceive their capacity to complete nonresident PME?
2. How do civilian employees perceive organizational support for participation in nonresident PME?
3. What do civilians know about the structure, content, and availability of nonresident PME courses?
4. How do civilians perceive the inclusion of nonresident PME as a foundational part of civilian leadership development?
5. How do civilian employees perceive the importance of nonresident PME completion for the attainment of their professional and career goals?

Responses to the five main questions were followed up with probing questions that allowed participants to clarify their responses and to provide additional detailed information. The responses were digitally recorded and transcribed word-for-word to ensure the accuracy of the data collection.

## Data Collection

The study was conducted among a sample of 12 employees assigned to the AETC Directorate of Manpower, Personnel, and Services. Demographics of the participants were as follows: 12 Air Force civilians in pay grades GS-09 (2), GS-11 (2), GS-12 (6), and GS-13 (2) were interviewed. Four of the participants had no prior military experience, while the other seven employees were retired Air Force enlisted members. Five participants had not completed any nonresident PME courses. Of those five, three participants had enrolled in at least one nonresident PME course but did not finish.

Seven participants had completed at least one nonresident PME course; however, two of the seven had not completed the nonresident PME course commensurate with their pay grades (ACSC). One of these seven participants had completed the ACSC online master's program and another participant was in the final course of the ACSC master's program at the time of the study.

Eight face-to-face interviews were conducted off duty in a location away from the participants' office work areas. Four other interviews were conducted by phone for the convenience of the participants with busy schedules. To ensure confidentiality, participants' names or other personally identifiable information were not used in the field notes, during the recorded interviews, or in the interview transcripts (participants were identified as A1, A2, A3, and so forth.)

Preceding the interviews, the AETC Legal Office and the Air Force Survey Office reviewed the research project to ensure compliance with Air Force and DoD ethics regulations. I also obtained written permission from the Manpower, Personnel and

Services director to conduct interviews in the building's conference room after duty hours.

## Limitations

The scope of the study was to investigate the attitudes and opinions of nonresident PME held by civil service employees assigned to an Air Force directorate. The study focused on employees' familiarity with the content and availability of nonresident PME courses, external barriers to nonresident PME completion, perceived organizational support for PME participation, and the role of PME courses for their leadership development and attainment of personal career goals. The intent of the study was not to discover correlations between employees' perceptions of nonresident PME and factors such as age, gender, occupational series, ethnicity, supervisory/nonsupervisory status, prior military service, and so forth. Furthermore, the focus of the study was not to collect data on behalf of the Air Force to be used for the modification of any PME courses. Any data provided by the participants outside of the study's scope were excluded from the data analysis.

## Data Analysis Procedures

The interview data, when transcribed, produced 127 pages of text. Initially, each transcript was read through without making any notations to gain an introductory feel for the participants' perspectives. Then, each interview transcript was searched by hand for meaningful segments of data. These meaningful segments were labeled with descriptive terms (i.e., codes), and then summarized and organized according to the major categories, or themes, that emerged from the data. This in-depth analysis of the transcripts identified

30 codes. Subsequent analyses eliminated redundancies and reduced the list to 15 codes that described the recurring patterns or relationships that cut across the data (Merriam, 2009). These codes were then grouped under five major themes and seven subthemes arising out of the data.

## Findings from Research

This section summarizes findings from the five main research questions. These results were used to support the policy recommendations presented later in this paper.

### Research Question 1

*Please explain what you know about the structure, content, and availability of nonresident PME courses.* Eleven of the 12 participants said they were familiar with the structure and content of nonresident PME courses. All 12 participants stated that eligibility requirements and application procedures were readily available on the Air University web site. Only one participant was not acquainted with the content and structure of nonresident PME courses but was aware of the eligibility requirements and how to apply.

In response to a follow-up question, four participants believed the Air Force did a good job of advertising the availability of nonresident PME courses, while a fifth participant stated the Air Force did an "average" job of publicizing the courses. Another participant remarked that the Air Force relied too heavily on supervisors getting the word out who may be biased in their opinions of nonresident PME depending on their own participation or nonparticipation. One participant admitted to having not seen any publicity related to nonresident PME courses and commented that only employees

following the Civilian Development Continuum chart would know about these professional development opportunities.

One participant stated that the nonresident ACSC content was very dry, while another participant noted this about the relevancy of the ACSC online master's program:

> But I must say what they teach in the program is not really here in the field. It is not anywhere close to them. When you're talking about leadership and what should be expected or how we should respond to our leaders and how we should respond to our leaders and how a good leadership accepts our recommendations…it is not the way it is. I mean it is the way it should be, but it is just not that way.

This same participant went on to say that the online ACSC course had more academic value than practical value.

**Research Question 2**

*What is your opinion regarding your ability to complete nonresident PME (e.g., computer skills, writing skills, ability to work alone, etc.)?* Prior research revealed that employees often cited reasons such as cost, availability, time constraints, distance, and lack of organizational support as barriers to participation in professional development opportunities. In this study, the seven participants that had completed at least one distance learning PME course all said they experienced no external barriers that impeded their ability to complete the course. The five participants who had not completed any nonresident PME courses did not identify any external barriers to successfully completing nonresident PME. Likewise, the two participants that had completed at least

one nonresident PME course but had not yet completed the PME course commensurate with their pay grade said they knew of no external barriers to completing another nonresident PME course.

Even though no external impediments to nonresident PME completion were identified, all five participants not having completed at least one PME course mentioned a lack of motivation was an internal barrier to completing distance learning PME courses. Reasons such as no guarantee of increased pay, a dislike for tests and papers, uninteresting course material, and satisfaction with current pay grade were described as disincentives for participating in nonresident PME courses.

**Research Question 3**

*What is your opinion about your organization's support for civilian participation in nonresident PME?* Perceptions of organizational support ranged from "very poor" to "very good." Opinions among the participants that had not completed at least one PME course were, for the most part, positive. Some of the participants believed their supervisors would provide some on-duty time to complete PME assignments. It is important to note that a respondent went on to say that the installation commander is very interested in convincing civilians to participate in PME and is searching for ways to increase civilian PME participation.

Two employees described receiving encouragement to enroll in nonresident PME from multiple supervisors. In fact, one of the two employees explained that prior to enrolling in nonresident PME, his supervisor met with him to discuss his overall

professional development plan. No other participant described this kind of interaction with a supervisor.

Some employees expressed unfavorable views of organizational support for nonresident PME participation. For example, one employee stated, "I know they have like a standard setup, developing civilians, but I think the Air Force needs to be much more proactive in giving civilians these plans and these skills and really try to help develop them along the way." Another participant remarked, "I think maybe Civilian Personnel…should play a greater role in helping people learn how to develop themselves along the way."

A couple of participants expressed opinions especially critical of organizational support. An employee enrolled in the online ACSC master's program stated that organizational support needed to be improved and rated organizational support as a "minus 10" on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being poor and 10 being excellent. In addition, an employee commented,

> I haven't gotten anything from the organization other than completing, I guess, the application and getting a signature for endorsement, but no one has approached me since then to ask me how I am doing, if I am close to completion, am I a dropout, what's my status, no one has approached me and asked me anything.

It noteworthy that many of the participants received little encouragement throughout their careers from supervisors to enroll in nonresident PME courses. Three employees had never been approached by a supervisor or colleague to discuss enrollment

in nonresident PME. "There is no mentorship at all, so you are kind of on your own to figure it out" was one employee's perception, while another employee said, "Employees should, at a minimum, be told about what professional development they are eligible for at the stage in their career."

Seven participants recalled receiving guidance from only one supervisor during their civil service careers. A participant remembered having one person talk about the availability of nonresident PME about 10 years ago, but there was no encouragement to enroll." Another said, "I have not heard or seen a supervisor or someone in the workplace talk to anyone about PME." A participant asserted that PME enrollment had never been mentioned in his career during performance appraisal sessions or even in casual conversation by anyone other than his current supervisor. Moreover, another employee claimed that no supervisor had ever encouraged him to complete nonresident PME.

**Research Question 4**

*What is your perception of nonresident PME as a foundational part of your civilian leadership development?* Overall, attitudes toward nonresident PME completion in the context of an employee's leadership development were mixed. The five participants (four of which were prior enlisted) not having completed at least one PME course perceived participation in nonresident PME to be of little benefit for their leadership development.

The four prior enlisted participants were convinced that nonresident PME would be of no benefit since they had gained leadership and management skills from enlisted

PME courses while on active duty. For example, one person stated, "[Nonresident] PME has the potential of enhancing [leadership skills], depending on the curriculum, but then it also has a potential of wasting time being just too redundant." Another participant remarked, "Because I have spent so much time in the Air Force on active duty that I got a lot of it from enlisted PME; therefore, I don't need the lower level PME to advance."

Of the seven participants that had completed at least on nonresident PME course, one person with prior military service had a negative view of nonresident PME. This person responded, "Again, for me as a civilian taking SOS, it didn't bring a lot to the table for me…actually when I was active duty as an enlisted person and doing PME that way, so I don't think PME has a value to it, because, for me, it didn't add as much because I already had a background."

Six employees that had completed nonresident PME expressed positive opinions of nonresident PME. Among other things, these participants believed that nonresident PME helped them speak the Air Force lingo, provided greater credibility with colleagues, and helped them "see the big picture." Furthermore, one participant stated that PME laid a very good foundation, especially if you are not exposed to mentorship.

Some participants made additional favorable comments such as the following: "The courses were good but not necessarily targeted to me as a civilian and being able to use it…it helped me understand some of the issues that are important to the Air Force…it made me a better leader." "I enjoyed reading the material about leadership management. It was nice to read about the way things should work." And, "I think it's important because PME for civilians [sic] you get to see your military how your military

counterpart operates and what is expected because we are supposed to be one organization."

**Research Question 5**

*How do you perceive the importance of nonresident PME completion for the attainment of your professional and career goals?* Nine of the 12 participants did not believe that nonresident PME completion was critical for the attainment of their professional and career goals. Responses from the participants revealed several reasons why they did not think nonresident PME completion was necessary for attaining their goals.

For example, one participant, who was adamant about not participating in nonresident PME if personal career goals can be achieved without it, commented, "As a person with more than 20 years of military experience, who is bringing along a whole boat load of experience already, which as a civilian, I am being hired for my experience and ability to do the job, which was already learned, paid for, and trained back when on active duty." Other participants believed that hiring officials regarded nonresident PME differently when making hiring decisions. One participant remarked, "I see people more oftentimes than not getting promoted without completing PME. It is not consistent. It may help you and it may not. Depends on who is hiring. I am aware there are [GS] 14s and [GS] 15s without PME." Likewise, another participant said, "PME has to be important to the particular hiring official. If PME is not important to them, then it is not going to make a difference."

Many participants noted they either witnessed employees without PME receive promotions or that employees with PME were passed over for promotions. For example, one participant observed, "I haven't seen anybody that I know of that has completed a PME on the civilian side get promoted. I got a friend who went from [GS] 11 to [GS] 12 and I know he didn't complete the PME. I don't know of anyone who was passed over for a position because they had not completed PME." Another participant said he didn't know of anyone who was passed over for a promotion because they had not completed PME.

Other salient comments were as follows: "PME does not guarantee you will be promoted or placed in a greater leadership role." "I guess you know on paper, or politically it says that it is important, that this is a square I need to fill if I want to get to the next level, but I guess in reality that's not how it always works because I know for a fact you have leaders in different roles but have not completed those squares. Will it get me where I want to be? Probably not." "I don't think other than having checked a block for me; I can't see where it [PME] added a benefit in promotion or career advancement."

In contrast to these negative perceptions regarding the role of nonresident PME in reaching personal career goals, three participants believed that PME completion played an important part when competing for promotions. One participant was certain that PME completion would be a factor in making GS-14 and acknowledged that hiring officials can use PME as a tiebreaker when choosing between two equally qualified candidates. Another participant stated, "PME is very important for the attainment of my professional

and career goals. It opens doors for other opportunities. I know of an instance when the fact that I had completed PME factored into the hiring official's decision."

Finally, one participant had this to say: "I see PME benefiting me when competing for promotions. It could tip me over the scale when competing against an equally qualified person." What is more, this participant believed that PME completion was especially important when competing for GS-14 and GS-15 positions; however, he also recognized that employees without having completed PME are promoted "all the time."

**Conclusion**

These findings indicated the participants were adequately aware of nonresident PME course offerings. None of the participants identified any external barriers to participation in nonresident PME courses. However, several of the participants, especially those that had completed enlisted PME, believed that nonresident PME course content would provide no benefit for their foundational leadership development. In addition, many of the participants received little to no encouragement from their supervisors, past and present, to participate in nonresident PME. Furthermore, the findings indicated that supervisors failed to establish mentoring relationships that could have enhanced the participants' leadership development.

## Findings from Literature

A review of recent studies uncovered a variety of factors impacting employee professional development participation. However, three factors, in particular, were often mentioned as impacting employee professional development: 1) relevance of professional

development programs to employees' learning needs, 2) employee awareness of professional development program benefits, and 3) supportive relationships between supervisors and subordinates.

Prior research has highlighted the need for professional development programs to target employees' specific learning needs. For example, a majority of the 80 participants in a study among K-12 educators emphasized that for professional development to be effective, it needed to be directly relevant to their classroom practices (Bernhardt, 2015). One participant said that professional development is a waste of time if it did not help them in the classroom. Furthermore, many of the participants desired professional development opportunities that would keep them up-to-date on the newest theories and practices in their field.

A group of researchers noted that effective professional development should focus on the knowledge and skills employees are expected to demonstrate in the workplace (Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan, & Hunt, 2012). Put another way, relevant professional development programs and activities should specifically target the occupational competencies all employees must master to perform their jobs well (Altun & Cengiz, 2012; Kyndt, Govaerts, Claes, Marche, & Dochy, 2012). Another researcher commented, "The manner in which professional development is provided may differ, but researchers agree that the context of the training should focus on specific skills...." (Pickett, 1999, as cited in Jones et al., 2012, p. 23).

The literature also indicated that access to relevant training and development programs can positively impact employee satisfaction (Shaheen, Ghayyru, & Yasmeen,

2014). This finding was reported by British researchers who surveyed over 400 retail workers. These researchers discovered that increasing employees' knowledge and skills increased their job satisfaction. In fact, another UK study revealed that dissatisfaction with development opportunities has a more profound impact on job satisfaction than workload or pay (Georgellis & Lange, 2007, as cited in Shaheen et al., 201).

Finally, Australian researchers recommended that professional development content be aligned with organizational goals to make participation worth employees' time (Cusick et al., 2009). According to Cusick et al. (2009), relevant professional development will incorporate employees' learning objectives, supervisors' expectations, as well as all aspects of the organization's core functions.

In addition to delivering, targeted continuing development programs, researchers recommended increasing participation rates through improved employee awareness of the availability and benefits of development activities. It is important for an organization's leaders to inform staff of available continuing professional development opportunities and the rationale for participating in those opportunities (Pedder & Opfer, 2010). Employees at all levels of the organization need to understand how professional development activities can enhance their technical expertise, leadership skills, and overall job performance. It is important for leaders to emphasize that professional development should not be done merely to fulfill a training requirement or simply to "fill a square," but should be completed so they will become better employees. Furthermore, studies have shown that an employee's beliefs about the benefits of professional development

programs influenced their choice to participate in continuing education opportunities (Rusby, Jones, Crowley, Smolkowski, & Arthun, 2013).

Besides relevance and awareness as factors that influenced participation in development activities, several studies emphasized the role of mentoring in effective continuing professional development programs. Mentorship can enhance any organization's professional development programs. According to Pool, Poell, Berings, and Cate (2015), "Mentors can encourage learning...by providing feedback, sufficient job autonomy, and social support" (p. 948).

Mentorship offers a variety of benefits for employee development. One researcher noted that supportive relationships provide the context in which supervisors and workers can negotiate expectations, goals, and limitations of professional development programs (Rowan, 2009). Kroelinger, Kasehagen, Barradas, and Ali (2012) concluded that mentoring relationships between mid and senior level employees can enhance workers' leadership skills and occupational competencies. Research has also shown that mentorship can foster collaboration between co-workers through the development of effective communication skills (CLIN MED, 2012, p. 109). Going further, LaPointe-Terosky and Heasley (2015) wrote that mentoring relationships can encourage the formation of supportive learning communities that promote greater employee motivation, job satisfaction, and retention.

Research indicated the importance of supervisors spending quality time with their staff members as a crucial aspect of supportive, developmental relationships. In fact, relationships between supervisors and subordinates form the core of an effective

development program (Plotner & Trach, 2010). Research data indicated these relationships have the ability to reduce employee turnover, increase promotion and retentions rates, and improve job satisfaction (Bordieri et al., 1988; Mann-Layne, Hohenshil, & Singh, 2004, as cited in Plotner & Trach, 2010).

Prior research suggested that positive supervisor-subordinate relationships can positively influence employees' perceptions of the organization, (Levinson, 1965, as cited in Pierce & Maurer, 2009). According to Maurer, Mitchell, and Shore's (2002, as cited in Pierce & Maurer, 2009) model of employee behavior, "The belief that one will personally benefit from development and the belief that the organization will benefit may motivate development activity" (p. 140). In other words, Maurer et al., (2002) applied the concept of social exchange theory, which posits that people often feel obligated to repay a benefit received from someone else. For this discussion, the implication is that when employers foster supportive, developmental, employees are likely to reciprocate by engaging in professional development opportunities sponsored by their organizations.

## Conclusion

Prior research revealed that organizations can enhance employee professional development participation by offering training programs targeted employees' specific learning needs, workplace contexts, and social needs. Educating workers about the benefits for themselves and their organizations can help motivate employees to participate in development programs. Lastly, supervisors should establish mentoring relationships with their employees as a means of enhancing collaboration between co-

workers, increasing professional development participation, and improving employee job satisfaction.

## Recommendations

Air Force senior leaders identified nonresident PME as an essential part of foundational leadership development for civilian employees. However, statistics show that nonresident PME completion rates for civilians are low. Based on the research findings and the review of relevant literature, three recommendations for improving civilian completion rates PME are presented.

### Recommendation 1

*Implement an intentional approach to educating civilian employees (especially prior enlisted civilians) about the benefits of nonresident PME participation for themselves and their organizations.* All five of the prior enlisted civilians interviewed believed their noncommissioned officer PME courses and active duty leadership experience had already equipped them to serve as effective civilian leaders. Therefore, the prior enlisted civilian employees perceived nonresident officer PME to be of little benefit for their leadership development.

Researchers recommended that organizations educate employees regarding the benefits of participation in professional development activities. Furthermore, research has shown that employees' beliefs about professional development influenced their decisions to participate in continuing education programs. Therefore, I recommend the Air Force provide mass briefings and distribute materials to eligible civilian employees explaining the occupational and institutional competencies achieved through participation

in nonresident PME courses. Moreover, these materials should compare and contrast the differences in learning outcomes between officer and enlisted PME to address objections held by former enlisted civilian employees.

**Recommendation 2**

*Conduct focus groups to discover civilian employees' specific learning needs to ensure that Air Force continuing education programs, including nonresident PME, are relevant to employees' real-world contexts.* The literature indicated that employees in a variety of occupational areas desired to participate in professional development opportunities that were relevant to their everyday workplace experiences. In fact, effective continuing education activities focus specifically on the knowledge and skills employees are expected to demonstrate in their real life situations. Furthermore, research has shown that targeted professional development can promote professional development participation, enhance workers' teamwork skills, and improve employees' job satisfaction. However, some of the employees I interviewed commented that nonresident PME did not target their real world contexts, nor did it target their specific learning needs as civilians.

Therefore, I recommend the Air Force conduct recurring unit-level focus groups in which civilians can discuss their professional development needs with one another. These facilitated discussions would be a low-cost means for gathering valuable insight into employees' real-world learning needs. Focus groups allow participants to learn from one another as they participate in a richer research experience that quantitative surveys typically do not provide. Furthermore, these focus group discussions may inspire

employees to participate in professional development activities currently offered. Focus group facilitators would observe these interactions and report their findings to the appropriate Air Force continuing professional education providers for review and implementation.

**Recommendation 3**

*Educate and train supervisors on establishing and maintaining effective mentoring relationships.* Numerous research studies have emphasized the benefits of mentoring in professional development programs. Supportive relationships between supervisors and employees can enhance employee motivation, facilitate collaborative learning, reduce employee turnover, increase retention rates, and improve job satisfaction. In addition, the literature suggested that positive supervisor-subordinate relationships can positively influence employees' perceptions of their organizations, which may motivate employees to participate in professional development activities.

Responses from the 12 civilians interviewed indicated that most had not received guidance or encouragement from supervisors throughout their careers related to nonresident PME participation. In fact, only one participant had ever discussed their overall professional development plan with a supervisor. In general, the findings indicated that the participants had not been mentored by supervisors during their civil service careers.

The literature makes it clear that employees are profited by mentoring relationships, which, among other benefits, can increase participation in professional development programs. However, the employees I interviewed indicated that mentoring

is not occurring. Therefore, I recommend the Air Force develop and implement a robust mentorship training program that supervisors are required to attend. These courses should educate supervisors about the tremendous value supportive relationships hold for employee professional development and provide the practical skills needed to establish and maintain those relationships.

Appendix B: Bullet Background Paper

BULLET BACKGROUND PAPER

ON

IMPROVING CIVILIAN PARTICIPATION IN NONRESIDENT PME

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of this paper is to present recommendations for improving civilian nonresident Professional Military Education (PME) completion rates.

**BACKGROUND**

- In 2009 letter, former Secretary of the Air Force, Michael Donley, and former Air Force Chief of Staff, General Norton Schwartz put forward the expectation for AF civilians to complete nonresident PME as part of an employee's foundational leadership development.

- However, civilian nonresident PME completion rates have remained low. In 2013, approximately 9% of civilians AF-wide and 3% of civilians assigned to JBSA-Randolph had completed nonresident PME.

- To investigate the modest civilian completion rates, I interviewed 12 civilians assigned to the AETC Manpower, Personnel, and Services Directorate regarding their perceptions of nonresident PME participation.

- The five interview questions were as follows:

  -- Please explain what you know about the structure, content, and availability of nonresident PME courses

  -- What is your opinion regarding your ability to complete nonresident PME (e.g., computer skills, writing skills, ability to work alone, etc.)?

  -- What is your opinion about your organization's support for civilian participation in nonresident PME?

  -- What is your perception of nonresident PME as a foundational part of your civilian leadership development?

  -- How do you perceive the importance of nonresident PME completion for the

attainment of your professional and career goals?

- In addition to the interviews, I reviewed recent studies that uncovered a variety of factors, in general, impacting employee professional development participation.

**FINDINGS**

- Findings from relevant literature:

  -- Relevant professional development can promote professional development participation, enhance workers' teamwork skills and improve employees' job satisfaction

  -- Employees' beliefs about the benefits of professional development influenced their decisions to participate in continuing education programs

  -- Mentoring relationships between supervisors and subordinates can positively influence employees' perceptions of their organization, which may motivate employees to participate in professional development programs

- Findings from my research project:

  -- Several employees interviewed commented that nonresident PME did not target their real world contexts, nor did it target their specific learning needs

  -- Many of the participants, especially those who were prior enlisted, perceived nonresident officer PME to be of little benefit for their leadership development

  -- Virtually all of the participants indicated that supervisors had not mentored them during their civil service careers

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Based on findings from my research and the relevant literature, I offer three recommendations for improving civilian nonresident PME participation rates

  -- 1) Implement an intentional approach to educating civilian employees (especially prior enlisted civilian) about the benefits of nonresident PME participation for themselves and their organizations

    --- This approach includes mass briefings and distribution of materials to civilian employees explaining the occupational and institutional competencies achieved through participation in nonresident PME

-- 2) Conduct recurring unit-level focus groups in which civilians can discuss their professional development needs with one another.

--- These facilitated discussions would provide the Air Force a low-cost means for gathering valuable insight into employees' real-world professional learning needs.

--- Moreover, focus groups would allow participants to learn from one another as they participate in a richer research experience that quantitative surveys typically do not provide.

-- 3) Educate and train supervisors on establishing and maintaining effective mentoring relationships

--- These mandatory courses should educate supervisors about the tremendous value supportive relationships hold for employee professional development and give supervisors the practical skills needed to establish and maintain those relationships.

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in this investigation of Air Force civilian employees' attitudes and opinions toward nonresident Professional Military Education (PME). The researcher is inviting civilian employees in pay grades GS-09 to GS-13, who are assigned to the AETC Directorate of Manpower, Personnel, and Services. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Edward Hodge, who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You may already know the researcher as an Education Services Specialist, but this study is separate from that role. Furthermore, neither the Department of the Air Force nor Air Education and Training Command are sponsors of this study.

**Background Information**

Air Force senior leaders have made known that nonresident Professional Military Education (PME) is a foundational component of civilian leadership development. The purpose of your participation in this study is to learn your attitudes and opinions toward nonresident PME. The information you provide may help the Air Force understand how civilians perceive participation in nonresident PME and help the Air Force develop policies and resources that could increase civilian nonresident PME completion rates.

**Procedures**

If you agree to participate, you and the researcher will meet on one occasion at a time and place convenient for you. During the interview, which will last no more than one hour, the researcher will ask you several open-ended questions regarding your perceptions of nonresident PME. With your permission, the interview will be tape-recorded to ensure the accuracy of the data collection. If a follow-up interview is needed, the researcher will contact you to schedule a time and place that is convenient for you.

Here are some sample questions:

1. What is your attitude toward nonresident PME as a foundational part of leadership development?
2. How do you perceive your ability to complete nonresident PME?
3. What is your opinion of your organization's support for civilian participation in nonresident PME?

**Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Your participation is voluntary. You will not incur any monetary costs as a result of participating in this study, nor will you be compensated for your participation. If you decide to participate, you will be free to exit the study at any time you choose without prejudice. Deciding not to participate or choosing to leave the study will not result in any

penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled, and it will not harm your relationship with the researcher or with anyone in your organization.

**Privacy**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. All interview notes, tape recordings, and transcriptions will be kept in a secure place by the researcher for at least 5 years, as required by the university. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as fatigue, stress or becoming upset. Being in this study would not pose a risk to your safety or well-being.

**Contacts and Questions**

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researcher, Edward Hodge, via phone at 830-434-8153 or email at hodgefam@outlook.com. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is Walden University's representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is IRB 11-13-14-0179536 and it expires on November 12, 2015.

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information, and I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant

Date of consent

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Signature

# Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Project: Perceptions of Air Force Civilians Regarding Participation in Nonresident Professional Military Education

**Time of Interview:**

**Date:**

**Place:**

**Interviewer:**

**Participant:**

**Occupational Series and Pay Grade of Participant:**

**Read to Participant** (consent form was read and signed prior to the interview)**:**
The purpose of your participation in this study is to learn your attitudes and opinions toward nonresident PME. The information you provide may help the Air Force understand how civilians perceive participation in nonresident PME and assist the Air Force in developing policies and resources that could increase civilian nonresident PME completion rates.

This interview will last no more than 1 hour. During the interview, you will be asked five questions and several subquestions to help you elaborate on your answers. I will be tape recording the interview and writing notes during the interview.

Your name will not be placed on any documentation associated with this study. The tape recording, interview notes, and transcription of this interview will be maintained in a secure cabinet away from the workplace.

Do you have any questions before we start the interview?

**Turn on and test the tape recorder.**

Questions:

1. Please explain what you know about the structure, content, and availability of

nonresident PME courses.

2. What is your opinion regarding your ability to complete nonresident PME (e.g., computer skills, writing skills, ability to work alone, etc.)?

3. What is your opinion about your organization's support for civilian participation in nonresident PME?

4. What is your perception of nonresident PME as a foundational part of civilian leadership development?

5. How do you perceive the importance of nonresident PME completion for the attainment of your professional and career goals?

Thank you for your cooperation and participation in this interview. Please remember that your answers will be kept confidential. If a follow-up interview is needed, I will contact you to schedule a suitable time and location.

Appendix E: Sample Interview Transcript

*Interviewer:* All right. All right, first question. Please explain what you know about the structure, content, and availability of nonresident PME courses.

*Participant:* Let's see, I know that I've been enrolled in the nonresident PME. Their commanding staff, the – what do they call it? The officer PME. But I'll be honest with you, I get started, and I get into it to a certain point, and then I wind up dropping out of it. And in the rationalization of my mind, it's why.

*Interviewer:* Well I tell you what, hold on because that's exactly what I'm going to be asking you about. So hold that thought because I did the DL ACSC on my third try. I enrolled twice, and blew it off, and then finally did it by the – I was not a stellar student, but I did the minimum I needed to do to pass the test and get through it. So at any rate – so you've got familiarity with the nonresident ACSC, at least what – when was that? How long ago was that?

*Participant:* This was now about, let's see, that was five – about six or seven years ago.

*Interviewer:* Okay. Are you aware that the course has changed? Like now there aren't any exams like there used to be. I think it's like discussion boards online and you have projects and stuff like that, but you don't have to go to the Ed Center to take tests anymore. They've revamped it. I guess that was – did they do that before I came here? Something like that, but at any rate, the ACSC course, the format has changed, and I don't know how well they've done at advertising that. But were you aware of that? Were you aware that it -

*Participant:* No, I wasn't. And I can tell you the ones that I did take, they were so dry in a -

*Interviewer:* Yeah.

*Participant:* You start getting into it, and before you know it – or at least I did. You start falling asleep on it. And then it's just trying to remember all the little details that they have. Okay, I know it's going to be a test on this thing, so everything has got to be important. So I've got to make sure that I remember.

*Interviewer:* Everything – yeah. So do you think that generally speaking, employees are aware of what nonresident PME is about? At least just in general terms. Not real specifically, but at least in general terms, do you think most employees have an idea of what it's about?

*Participant:* I think every employee gets an e-mail that reminds them that it's available, but there's nothing that actually says, "Here is the reward at the end of the course."

*Interviewer:* I tell you what, that's something that I've heard a lot. That is a – seems to be a very common theme that's been running through these interviews. I kind of anticipated that, but at any rate, now – well I tell you what, I'm going to hold off on that for just a second. Okay, so at least it's safe to say that you are currently – you have familiarity with nonresident PME in terms of what's involved, how you would enroll, where you would go to get information, what website and all that kind of stuff.

*Participant:* And I don't know whether that's even changed. It used to be that I would go to the education center like for the SOS and do the enrollment through them.

*Interviewer:* Oh yeah, now you actually go just do it online. I'm trying to think; do you actually have to – that's a good question. I can't remember. When I did it, I don't know – you know, that's a good question. I don't know now if it's required to go to the Ed Center and to get their assistance in enrolling for civilians to enroll, but at least – but at a minimum, if you were to decide that you wanted to reenroll, you would pretty much yourself could navigate your way through. And whether it's having to go to the Ed Office or not or going to the website, you could pretty much -

*Participant:* Yeah, if I have the details, the instruction on what I need to do, I can pretty well follow that.

*Interviewer:* Okay, all right. So when it comes to you personally, what is your opinion regarding your ability to complete nonresident PME? And what I mean by that is anything from your own – you assess your own academic ability, computer skills, your ability to work alone. Because it's nonresidents DL. You're not sitting in a classroom. Just when you think about the opinion of your ability to complete if you were to choose to reenroll, your assessment of your ability to complete nonresident PME.

*Participant:* Goes back to what I said earlier, goals. Now keep in mind, I had already done the nonresident correspondence courses as an enlisted person in NCO academy. The senior NCO. And guess what? I didn't have any problems with it. I completed those because if I didn't have that, then I couldn't be considered for the next promotion. On this one, every time it's like okay, what do I have to lose. Then I think I did the SOS like two times. And each one of them is like well, it takes a lot of time for one thing, but there's no reward. i.e., none of the job applications that I've ever applied for for positions ever make it a mandatory requirement that you have that as a square filled.

*Interviewer:* Oh, yeah. Yeah. That's right. So is it safe to say basically for you, there are no barriers to completing it other than how you perceive its importance in reaching any of your career goals? As far as being able to do distance learning education, as far as having the kind of personality that has no problem working alone.

*Participant:* Yeah.

*Interviewer:* Any other kind – you don't see any issues that you would have being able to complete -

*Participant:* No, I should be able to – but when you're at a point in your life that you've got so many things going on, you have to – you say, "Okay, can I sacrifice this? Do I really need this?" I mean take the time to really think this. Do I really need it to go ahead and complete this course? It's costing me X amount of hours every evening and the weekends away from the family, and from being able to do other things that are more important.

*Interviewer:* So do you think you have the time just – and not – and I don't mean even thinking about whether or not it's worth it or any of those issues, whether or not how it would be viewed if you were applying for a job just not even thinking about any of that. Just generally speaking, do you think you have the time to complete a nonresident PME?

*Participant:* Let's just say that I can make the time if need be, but I have to have something – from what I see right now with PME, I need to have a strong motivator. Hey, you complete your PME, we're going to give you $100.00 a month extra. That's a motivator.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Help you with your down payment on that sports car.

*Participant:* That's right.

*Interviewer:* Yeah, I got you. So really, it's there aren't any – you don't see any external barriers to you completing any internal in terms of your own abilities, computer skills, ability to work alone, any of that sort of thing, and you don't see any external barriers, family situation -

*Participant:* No.

*Interviewer:* You don't have any part-time employment that might take up your time and interfere with it, those kind of things.

*Participant:* No, I can shift my time, but as I'm doing that, I'm prioritizing the time. What's more valuable?

*Interviewer:* I got you. So right now, as it currently stands, it's not – based on what you know about it and based on – yeah, based on what you know about it and based on – you – right now, it wouldn't be a priority for you.

*Participant:* No.

*Interviewer:* You wouldn't put that high on that priority list.

*Participant:* And my current job doesn't make it a priority either.

*Interviewer:* All right. Good, good, good. So oh, let's go back to one thing for a second. You are retired, enlisted. You had to complete all the enlisted PME.

*Participant:* Correct.

*Interviewer:* Do you believe that in light of the fact that you've completed enlisted PME that completing officer PME, which is SOS, ACSC, it will cause that whole thing, do you believe that having already completed enlisted PME that you would be greatly benefitted by completing nonresident PME? When I say benefitted – not necessarily in terms of promotion, but in terms of just what you know about the Air Force and leadership and all of those sorts of things, do you think that -

*Participant:* To put it in simple terms, it's redundant. It's like been there, done that. The only thing is the certificate is going to say SOS or whatever else. But as I'm looking at the material, it's the same stuff I already went through as a junior enlisted.

*Interviewer:* Yeah, I've gotten that comment. That's something I had not – before I started thinking when putting together this topic in my proposal and all that, that's one of the things I had not thought about how prior enlisted civil service employees would view completing nonresident PME, nonresident – it's officer PME, civilians, and officer equivalent grades, which I find that really interesting. So you believe that your enlisted PME background has prepared you well for – to perform your Air Force mission and to equip you with the kinds of leadership and management skills that you need to -

*Participant:* I made it to the top three, yeah.

*Interviewer:* Okay. All right. All right. Number three, what is your – and I'll explain to you what I mean by this. What is your opinion about your organization's support for civilian participation in nonresident PME? Do you see it in terms of where you work specifically in the Air Force kind of generally in your experience with civil service, do you see it as something that's encouraged? Do you see it as something that where any resources – have you ever seen any resources made available to help you complete it? Have you ever had an offer of, "Hey, Participant, if you enroll in nonresident PME, I'll give you time while you're at work to work on it using your government computer." How do you assess the organization's support for civilian participation?

*Participant:* At least at ASPC, they support it. You could do whatever you want to on your time.

*Interviewer:* Oh, okay. I got you. Have you ever been approached by a supervisor or a colleague and encouraged to participate in nonresident PME?

*Participant:* I think Todd – that's the thing he's really pushing for folks. He's good at trying to build that as part of the career path for individuals. But it's fine, though, because most of those folks have not been – are not prior service.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Okay. Oh, let me go back to just one thing a little bit. I want to make sure I make a note of it. In addition to your enlisted PME, you've also got two masters degrees, right?

*Participant:* Yeah.

*Interviewer:* So you would – when looking at not only your PME, but also your academic – what you've accomplished academically, that when you – especially when you put both of those together, you would see yourself as being adequately or even more than adequately prepared for the challenges of leadership and management in today's Air Force.

*Participant:* I think the term that is used nowadays is you're over qualified.

*Interviewer:* Over – okay. I got you. I got you. All right. All right, so when it comes to organizational support, if you had to rate it on a scale of 1 to 10, what would you -

*Participant:* The support -

*Interviewer:* To 1 being no support, 10 being incredible support, where would you – how would you rate organizational support?

*Participant:* I would give it a 10. Once again, it's like if somebody can do it on their own time, that's no problem. We support you. You can have after work, weekends, holidays. We're there for you.

*Interviewer:* We're there for you. I got you. And you have outside of your current supervisor, has anyone ever talked to you about personally face-to-face either doing an appraisal time or casual conversation, talked to you about nonresident PME?

*Participant:* No.

*Interviewer:* Okay. All right.

*Participant:* Other than just the e-mails coming through – it's available, if you want to be considered for the in-resident course, here are some opportunities for folks. But oh, by the way, if you were prior service or all these disqualifiers, then you're not eligible for it.

*Interviewer:* And those come out of AFPC, right?

*Participant:* Uh-huh.

*Interviewer:* Yeah, okay. All right. Okay, number four. What is your perception of nonresident PME? And we've talked about this some already. What is your perception of nonresident PME as a foundational part of your civilian leadership development in terms of when you assess your own knowledge and skills and abilities when it comes to leadership, when it comes to management, those sorts of things? Do you see nonresident PME as an important part of your leadership development? Do you see it as an optional part? You mentioned the word earlier redundant. Do you – how do you – how do you see – how do you see yourself being benefitted by – and not as far as promotion or anything like that, but just in terms of your own learning and increasing your own knowledge skills, all that sort of thing?

How do you see nonresident PME in that mix? Do you see it – would you see it as being beneficial?

*Participant:* At this point, no. In the – I say that because I've had people tell me what my weakness is. And they say, "Participant, you could get further ahead if you only knew how to kiss ass." And the PME isn't going to show you that. It's mentorship. You need someone that can actually take you under the wings and show you the ropes of how to be successful. Taking a book and reading it and all that is one thing, but PME – in a correspondence method, it's not teaching you what some folks might be looking for.

*Interviewer:* So basically, you see little to no benefit – at least at this point in your career and considering where you may want to go in your career -

*Participant:* And in my point in life.

*Interviewer:* You don't see it – yeah, okay. You don't see it as – you see it as having little to no benefit for you.

*Participant:* For me. I see no benefit right now. There's no rewards at the end of it. I don't even know if they're going to give you a certificate in a frame.

*Interviewer:* Would you – what about if you were right at the start of your civil service career? Do you think you might have a different perspective on completing a nonresident PME?

*Participant:* If I had had no prior military experience, I think my attitude would be totally different. Because then, I would be in a position where I would want to learn all that I could about the military opposed to it being the other way around. I already know everything about the military, which is what – which is what the PME is around. That's what they're talking about. They're not talking about the civilian world. They're talking about being a federal employee working on a military installation or working with people that wear a uniform.

*Interviewer:* So for you, your military background, your academic background, your work experience, all of that when you put all of that together, your perspective is shaped by all of that. If you didn't have all of that going for you, then you believe your perspective would be different.

*Participant:* It would. Twenty years military. Twenty years plus of military experience, heavy supervised civilian – now I recommended for those folks that never had any kind of military background to get as much education as they could. And they SOS is something that I would recommend for the newcomer. Doesn't cost you anything. Go ahead and enroll, and if nothing else, at least you're going to learn the structure of the military, you're going to learn the different types of ranks that are available. You're going to learn the administrative process and how to do paperwork in order to be able to be successful and survive in a military environment that is very structured. This is the way we do ESS's, and et cetera.

*Interviewer:* Do you believe that nonresident PME provides a significant amount of material of leadership management training that is not necessarily military specific, but that could be used across a variety of occupations and career fields, whether government, nongovernmental?

*Participant:* Yeah, the management styles are all described same as they were in the PFE. Same as it were in the senior NCO in the NCO academy. It's the same thing. They're all the same styles, different approaches.

*Interviewer:* I got you. Okay. Good. So if you had just finally on this question, so on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being of no use, 10 being let's say indispensable, how would you rate when it comes to your perception of nonresident PME for your foundational leadership

development, what rating would you give it from 1 of no benefit, absolutely none, to 10, gotta have it, can't do without it?

*Participant:* I would say somewhere around a 2 or a 3.

*Interviewer:* Right. Okay. Great. All right. Last question. And again, we've already talked a lot about this, so this will give you a chance to maybe add anything that you haven't already elaborated on. How do you perceive the importance of nonresident PME completion for the attainment of your professional and career goals? And typically, that boils down to – and you've already mentioned this. How it – when you think about your – where what you aspire to, whatever pay grade, whatever position, whatever the case may be, how do you perceive the importance of completing nonresident PME to reach the goals that you have?

*Participant:* If you are the type of person that likes to be in front of a crowd because it was part of the awards package, member completed XPME during this quarter or for the year, then it'd be okay. But for me, it's like for what. I mean I'm not that type of person that needs that type of recognition.

*Interviewer:* So when it comes to your personal career goals, professional career goals, you don't – based on what you know about how hiring decisions are made and how people are selected and all that sort of thing, you don't see it as being an essential part of your preparation to get to the places where you aspire to be.

*Participant:* No, but if I'm looking at hiring an employee and I see that they've got something like that, then it becomes a weighable factor in my mind.

*Interviewer:* Oh, okay. So it could be a tiebreaker. If you've got two equally qualified employees, it could be a tiebreaker.

*Participant:* Yeah.

*Interviewer:* Would it be the only – if everything else is equal, having participated in nonresident PME, that would be I would assume one tiebreaker. But again, there may be some – are there some other things? And you don't have to name them, but I'm saying are there some other factors that you might also consider? You know, PME, that could be used as a tiebreaker.

*Participant:* There's a whole bunch of other things that I would consider. And what I would be looking for is the word completion. It's kind of like do I hire this individual that has not completed high school or this individual that has completed high school. And I would go with the one that has completed high school because they followed through. Would I hire one that has graduated from college or one that has taken some college coursework? And I would go with the one that's completed the college because they followed through on a particular goal, and it would be the same thing with enrolling in a PME. If they enrolled in it and they took the time to go ahead and complete it, then I would use that as a character when I'm looking at various records. This one didn't, this one was enrolled but didn't complete it, this one followed through.

*Interviewer:* So for – that question concerned you personally, its role in meeting your career goals. Do you see – something that I've heard, and not just in these conversations, but since I've been in civil service, people talk about when it comes to folks getting hired for positions that they see people who have not completed PME getting hired, and there are some employees who are bothered by that because for a variety of reasons. And your experience, while you've been in civil service, have you seen fellow employees, colleagues be promoted without having completed PME? Do you see it – how much of a factor have you seen it be in whether or not somebody gets hired for a job or not? Have you seen it make a difference or…?

*Participant:* I've never done the analysis on it. I just know if I'm in a voting situation of things that I would consider.

*Interviewer:* Do you think that – so you're okay with someone who has completed nonresident PME who is qualified being hired over someone who has not completed PME who is equally qualified? You see there's no problems. You don't see any problems with that. You think that's fair? They're both equally qualified. Let's say they both have the same college degree level, relatively the same work experience. It comes down to a tiebreaker. And I'm talking about this just generally about folks generally. So you see no – even though you in your opinion of its value for you, you see it as not being beneficial. You don't, however, view it as being unfair or not right for hiring officials to use it as a criterion when determining who to hire -

*Participant:* As a disqualifier, every one of them has access to it. The playing field is the same. It's what is a choice that one makes whether they want to enroll in it or not that makes a difference.

*Interviewer:* Are you aware of since you've been in civil service, are you aware of being passed over for a promotion because you hadn't completed nonresident PME?

*Participant:* No. But I have for awards. Man, if you only had -

*Interviewer:* Oh, okay. That's interesting. Because up until now, it's been talked about in terms of promotion, but you bring in an interesting – that's interesting. You're saying when it comes to awards, looking at the role that it plays in awards. So you believe that you've been passed over for an award when competing because you had not completed nonresident PME.

*Participant:* No, that is a fact.

*Interviewer:* That's interesting. Okay. What's your opinion of that?

*Participant:* It's not my fancy to be in front of a crowd, so…but I know that for certain things, it does carry some weight, and that's just one of those that I've seen in the awards process, or they enroll in PME, and they completed it. It's no different than with the enlisted side of the house, or they enrolled in school, or they completed their CCA -

*Interviewer:* Oh, man. Yeah. Yeah, that is definitely true. Good. I'm glad you brought that up. That's a piece of data that I had not -

*Participant:* Considered.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Okay. So those are basically my questions. Is there anything else? Can you think of anything else that you want to add that I haven't asked about? Is there any – when it comes to your opinion, your perception of participation in nonresident PME, whether for yourself or just in general, anything else, any other thoughts?

*Participant:* If leadership actually felt that there's a lot of value in PME, they would give you the time to go ahead and get it done on their time, their dime. They'd do it for everything else. Oh, you've got to go through this BII training, and it's going to take a couple of hours to

get through it, but yet, for something that's like this, PME, you have to do it on your own dime.

*Interviewer:* Are military members allowed to do their PME stuff? And I realize this, there's resident – the resident aspect. But like when I was on active duty, I did NCO academy through correspondence.

*Participant:* I did, too.

*Interviewer:* Oh, okay. So are – do you find that any difference that there's a difference between level of support given to military members and when it comes to getting their professional development, whether it's PME or any other aspect of professional development, that there's a difference between the support given to military as compared to the support given to civilian employees?

*Participant:* Yeah, there is.

*Interviewer:* So it favors the military?

*Participant:* There's a very strong perception that if you're wearing the uniform, you're more liberal, and the reason for that is you're technically – you're on 24 hours a day, whereas a civilian only works set hours, and you've got to leave. Otherwise, they're not going to pay you or cover you for any kind of liability if you're there after hours.

*Interviewer:* Okay. Interesting. Okay. Well, that ends what I have. Anything else before we conclude?

*Participant:* No, that was good. Good questions. I was all nervous coming in here.

*[End of Audio]*